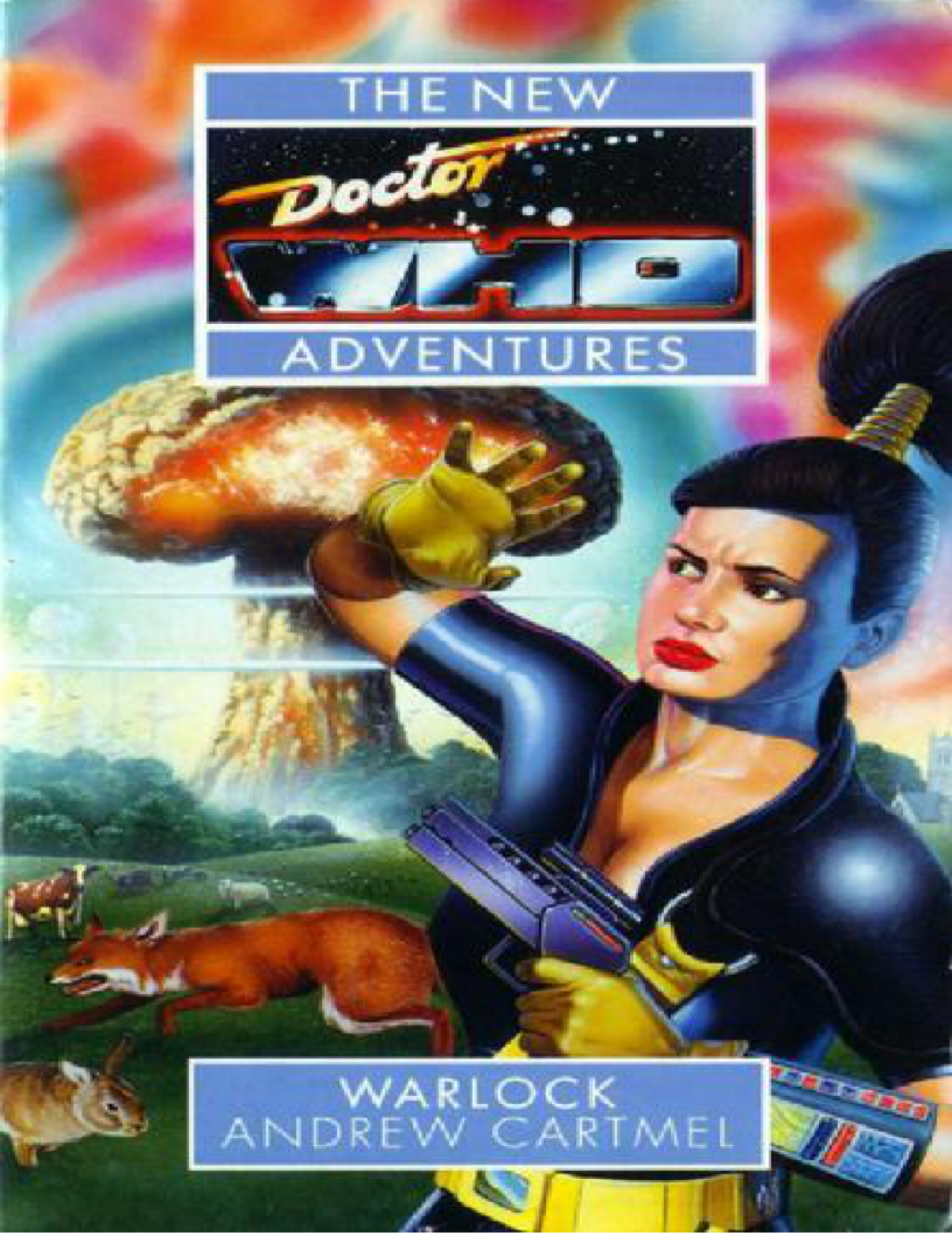
THE NEW
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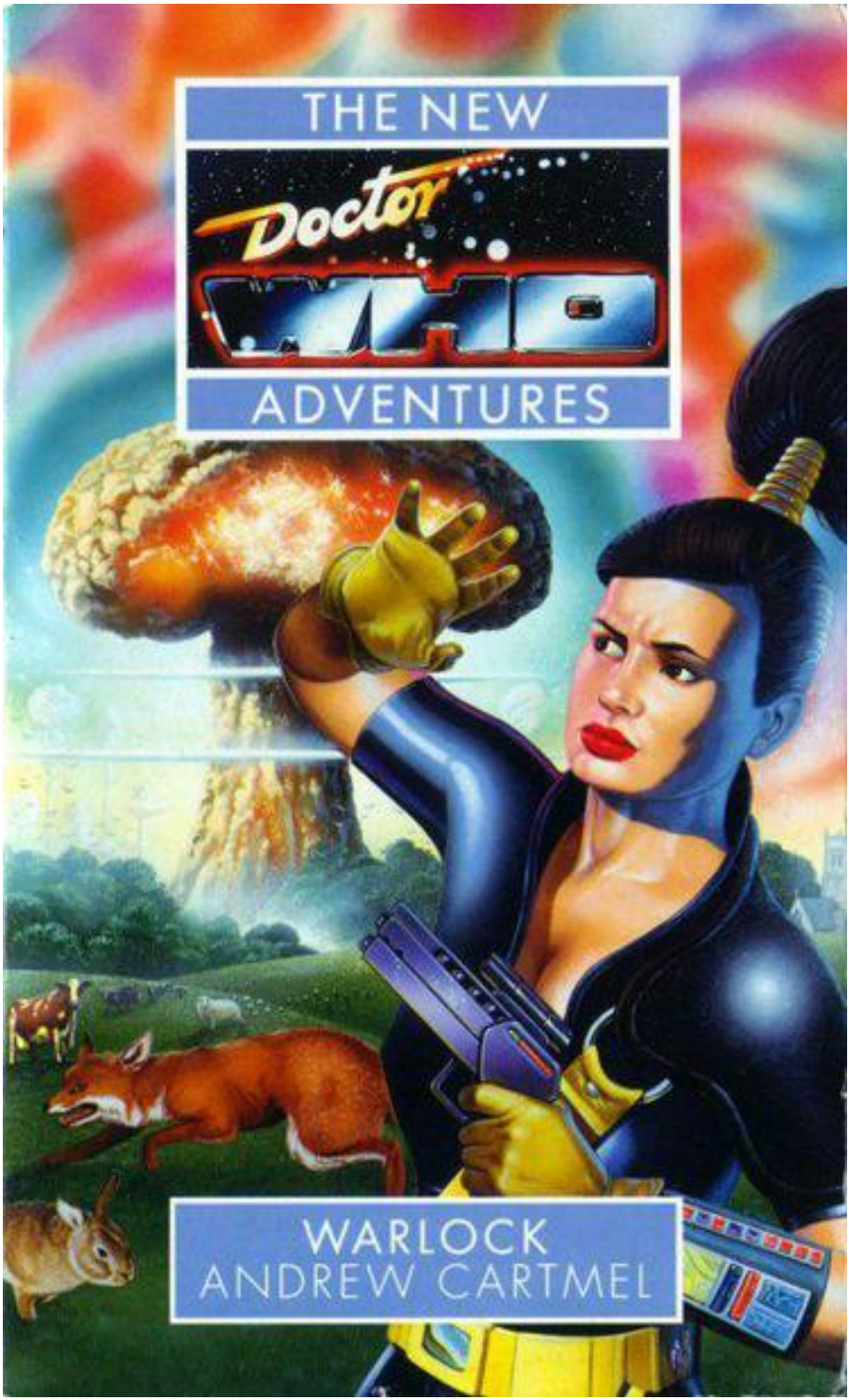
ADVENTURES
WARLOCK
ANDREW CARTMEL



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Andrew Cartmel was script editor of the **Doctor Who** television series from 1987 to 1989 before moving on to edit **Casualty**. He has written comic strips for Marvel UK and is currently writing **Judge Dredd** for Fleetway. This is his second book in the New Adventures series.

WARLOCK

Andrew Cartmel

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In memory of my father,

George Bliss Cartmel

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Chapter 1

Ace woke up between clean sheets. For a moment she experienced that sort of total disorientation which is almost a deliverance from existence. She didn't remember where she was or even, for a brief instant, who she was.

But gradually, lying there in the bed, she pieced it together. There was the familiar sound of pigeons cooing that reverberated down the hollow length of a chimney to echo in the empty fireplace of the bedroom. There was the comforting musty smell of lavender on the pillow.

Outside the window green branches eased against the glass letting bright slices of sunlight into the room. Judging by the angle of the light it was late afternoon.

Ace had been hopelessly drunk when she'd got in. She'd spent the better part of the night and most of the previous day drinking with friends in London.

Or at least, she and Vincent had been drinking Justine had refrained because they'd just learned she was going to have a baby.

Ace had been sitting in their garden, the dark branches of a tree stirring above her, trying to name the constellations in the night sky while she and Vincent finished the brandy.

Ace wondered how long she had been asleep. It might be twelve hours or thirty-six. There was a soft sound on the pillow next to her face and the movement of something at the edge of her vision. She turned and saw, almost touching her face, too close to focus on properly, a warm curve of fur.

Ace reached over and stroked the cat. His name was Chick, short for Chich-ester. He was a small lithe cat with ginger fur and greenish-amber eyes. The Doctor had discovered his mother, a wild cat, wounded and sheltering in one of the outbuildings of the big manor house.

The Doctor had brought the cat into the house and cleaned her cuts while Benny had poured her a saucer of milk. The Doctor had glanced absent-mindedly at the saucer and said, 'No thank you. Oh, it's for the cat.'

But the wild cat had turned her nose up disdainfully at the milk, as she would continue to do for the rest of her stay with them. She had however permitted the Doctor to tend her wounds. Two or three days later, playing with her in the sunlit ruins of the greenhouse, it was Ace who'd realised that the wild cat was pregnant.

And it was Ace who'd woken from a deep sleep at 3 a.m. and heard the 1

wild cat crying out in the silence of the dark sweltering summer night. Crying out as she went into labour.

Ace had pulled on a T-shirt and an old pair of trainers and hurried down to the kitchen, only to find the Doctor also on the way there, fully dressed in jacket and tie, as he was often to be found in the middle of the night.

The wild cat was dragging herself painfully around the tiled floor of the kitchen and she let out a yowl of pain and relief when she saw the Doctor and Ace, as though she had been waiting for them.

They sat up for the rest of the night and kept her company as she gradually gave birth to twelve kittens. The Doctor had helped her as if he was experienced with assisting other life forms during childbirth.

He lifted up each tiny creature as it parted from its mother and, glowing with pride, showed it to Ace.

'Do you want me to get you a cigar?' said Ace.

But she had felt it herself. A primal excitement had come into the tiled kitchen of the big old house, as if invading from the tangled garden outside.

A wildness and a sense of magic as she and the Doctor watched each tiny new life emerge into the universe. Benny must have heard something, or sensed the excitement coming from the kitchen, because she woke up and joined them, came downstairs in her dressing gown, rubbing her eyes. She stood yawning, complaining about the cold floor on her bare feet, then made coffee for the midwifery team as the first dawn light came through the windows and spread a rosy gleam on the walls.

Chick had been the first born, the pick of the litter, and they elected to keep him when they gave the other kittens away. The Doctor used his computer to leave messages on noticeboards all over Kent asking for good homes for kittens. He also hacked into a number of confidential databases when they began to get replies. 'I just want to make sure they're suitably stable individuals,' said the Doctor.

'Simple, decent folk,' said Ace.

'If you like, yes.' He'd run his findings through some psychological profiling software and insisted on turning down a couple of dodgy prospects.

When the last of the kittens had been taken away, the wild cat had simply wandered off and disappeared again, as suddenly as she had come. It was as if she'd only been waiting around until she could give birth and find good homes for her children.

But Chick had stayed. He'd been at the house for nearly a year now. Part of the furniture of the place, adapting effortlessly to the strange comings and goings and the changing faces.

Ace reached out and stroked him sleepily. Instantly the small ginger cat responded, purring, a deep warm engine starting up inside a bundle of fur.

2

'I don't suppose you want to get me a drink, do you?' said Ace. She cleared her throat. Her voice was clotted with sleep. 'Freshly squeezed orange juice would be nice but I'd settle for a glass of gently carbonated mineral water.'

Chick purred more loudly, then rose up and stretched. He wandered down from the pillow and stood on the covers just under Ace's chin. He began to press down rhythmically with his paws, massaging the bed covers, pushing down on her breasts as he prepared to settle down again. 'Careful,' said Ace.

'I'm a bit tender.'

The cat complained loudly as she lifted him off and set him on the carpet.

The bed creaked under Ace as she poked a foot out. She eased from under the covers, feeling cold air rush in to displace the pocket of warmth created by her sleeping body.

As she got out of bed the sheets pulled free of the mattress and sagged suddenly in one corner. A heavy metal object slid out and thudded to the floor.

The cat came over and sniffed at Ace's handgun. She had unpacked it last night and slipped it into bed with her. She didn't really need to, she was safe enough here at the house in Kent. But old habits died hard.

Downstairs in the kitchen there was no sign of the Doctor or Benny. Ace opened the big refrigerator with one hand, holding her too-small

black silk kimono shut with the other.

She grinned with pleasure when she saw the vacuum-packed cartons of fresh ground Sumatran coffee and two bulging paper bags bearing the trade marks of a famous delicatessen. ‘Smart,’ she said. The Doctor had obviously been shopping.

There was also a plastic bag containing what looked like dried mushrooms.

It was sealed with a twist of wire and a handwritten note taped to it read: *Please do not eat. I hope I don’t have to emphasize how important this is.*

Ace recognized the spidery slanting handwriting as the Doctor’s. The note was written in faded fountain pen ink on a brownish scrap of old paper. Ace peeled it off the plastic bag, teasing the fragile paper carefully off the tape so she could inspect the other side.

As far as she could make out, it was a Russian railway ticket which had been issued sometime between the world wars. The dried mushrooms were an odd mottled colour, splashes of deep indigo and faint delicate green still discernible on the wrinkled brown caps. Ace shrugged, stuck the note back on and replaced the bag in the refrigerator. Time for coffee.

The coffee pot was a cafetière, an elegant streamlined glass and stainless steel object. Ace always thought it looked as if it had been looted from a laboratory on an alien spaceship – as indeed it might have been.

3

She pulled the conical lid and plunger out of the glass cylinder only to find that there was still a hard-packed residue of old coffee grounds in the bottom, an interesting varicoloured fungus growing on it. ‘Just a little science experiment,’ she said to the ginger cat, who was wandering around the tiled floor, rubbing against her ankles.

‘Why doesn’t anybody ever clean anything in this bloody place?’ She dug out the diseased plug of coffee using a wooden spoon and dumped it in the bin before thoroughly washing the glass cylinder.

The kettle, of course, was still out of action. No one had bothered to replace it or even remove it from its appointed place on the window-sill above the sink. It still sat there, a deformed lump of metal,

possibly interesting from a sculptural point of view but quite useless for boiling water.

Shooting a .45 calibre bullet through a kettle does tend to do that. Ace took the useless piece of metal and slung it into the swing-bin in the corner of the kitchen to join the mouldy coffee grounds. The cat flinched at the sudden violent sound. ‘Sorry,’ said Ace.

She put a saucepan full of water on the stove and left it to boil. On the door of the tall refrigerator there was a pad of paper and a pencil fastened with magnets. Ace took the chewed stub of pencil and wrote *New kettle* on the pad.

Then, as an afterthought, *Please clean the coffee pot after use.*

When the water had boiled she poured it over the fresh coffee granules, waited a minute and then plunged the cafetière down. The coffee emerged dark and rich.

She poured a cup, sniffed a bottle of milk, added a drop, found the bag of sugar in the spice cupboard and then went hunting for a spoon.

She opened the drawer where the cutlery was normally kept, only to find it empty. Even the antique sheet of newspaper that lined the drawer was gone. Ace was rather sorry. She had spent many happy moments studying the photograph on that page: 1950s people standing cheerfully in their swimsuits and sunglasses, preparing to watch the distant mushroom cloud of an atom bomb test.

Now she stared at the bare wood that lined the drawer and slammed it shut, cursing. People were always moving things around in this place.

The adjacent drawer normally contained a cardboard box chaotically jumbled with electrical components, old Bakelite plugs, scraps of wire, every kind of fuse imaginable, silicon chips which had been salvaged from a G-8 police hovercraft in New York and several odd-looking glass objects which the Doctor solemnly advised them not to mess with. Now Ace opened the drawer and found that the box had been removed and the cutlery was in residence. She selected a small silver teaspoon with RFC embossed on the handle and stirred sugar into her coffee.

4

The smell of hot coffee instantly triggered her appetite and she wandered back to the refrigerator, feet flinching at the touch of the

cold tiles, the cat circling, rubbing her bare ankles with his soft fur.

She took one of the delicatessen bags out and looked inside. It contained small dark brown bottles sealed with rubber stoppers. Each bottle had a small label with a skull and crossbones neatly printed on it. 'Oh, great,' said Ace, her stomach rumbling. But the second bag contained croissants, fresh and golden with delicately flaking pastry. She put three of the plumpest ones on a baking sheet. That was when she found the missing box of electrical components.

Luckily she looked in the oven before she switched it on. The box had been hastily stuffed in there by someone too lazy to find a proper place for it. Too lazy or in too much of a hurry, Ace thought.

She put the box on the window-sill in the space where the kettle had been, resisting the impulse to play with the glass shapes.

She was carrying her coffee and croissants through to the breakfast room when the alarm went off.

The sideboard in the breakfast room had a scale model of the kind architects use. It featured a miniature of the house and grounds made of balsa wood and clay, carefully painted. An electrical cable snaked away from the model into a wall socket. Several strings of Christmas tree lights had been glued to the model and wired to the alarm system. Now a blue bulb was flashing on and off by the gate on Allen Road.

That was where the intruders were trying to break in.

Ace ran through to the sitting room, leaving her coffee and croissants to get cold. The black kimono fell open, flapping around her naked legs as she ran to the television set that sat on a three-legged ebony table in the middle of the threadbare Persian carpet.

She switched the TV on and punched zero, a channel dedicated to the security cameras that ringed the estate. Or at least it was supposed to be. The TV

hummed to life, but instead of seeing a view from the camera nearest to the alarm site Ace found herself watching a *Ren and Stimpy* cartoon being broadcast from Luxembourg, with subtitles in French and German. It was the one where Ren has a toothache. Or is it Stimpy?

Ace cursed. Someone was always messing with the defence system. She ran upstairs. The alarm was still sounding, a shrill jangling of

electric bells echoing from the kitchen behind her.

In her bedroom Ace pulled on a pair of jeans, tucking the black kimono in like a shirt, jammed her bare feet into a battered old pair of DMs and pushed the gun into the waist of her white cotton knickers.

As she raced out of the front door and across the lawn she realized the small ginger cat was trotting through the long grass, following her like a dog.

5

'Go away,' she hissed, 'this could be messy.' But the cat ignored the warning.

Chick liked Ace, liked the way she moved. Her posture promised excitement and he was eager to see what form that excitement might take.

He was a small, limber cat with precise, delicate movements, loping excitedly through the wild garden, matching Ace's pace as she passed the wrecked Victorian greenhouse. Then past the apple tree which still showed the scars of an incident years ago when a car had exploded in the garden.

Now they were nearing the garage and the driveway that led down to the gate. In the centre of the drive was an island of lawn with a bed of tulips gone wild among the thick long grass.

Chick hurried through the rich green growth, the grass pleasantly damp and cool as it rubbed against his slim furred ribs. He plunged through the tulips, the fat white flowers shaking as he parted their stems. Ace was on the other side of the flower-bed, standing beside the fountain.

The fountain was a tall stone structure which had once been bright and cleanly whitewashed. Now mossy green growth encroached on it. Chick watched as Ace paused by the dry fountain. He jumped up onto the rim of the structure then hopped into the broad empty bed of it. He picked his way carefully among the crumpled beer cans.

The cans, the discarded syringes and the graffiti which spattered the fountain were reminders of the last time intruders had got into the grounds.

Ace had been prepared to chase them off using a shotgun loaded with

rock-salt – painful, but not usually lethal – but the Doctor had simply gone out and talked to the crowd of kids and they'd eventually gone home. Or wherever it was they went.

Now Ace stood in the shadow of the fountain, knowing she couldn't be seen from the gate. She drew her gun and peered cautiously around the edge of the fountain. The cat stirred carefully beside her, eager to see what she was looking at.

Chick could see the tension and excitement in the way Ace held the gun and his own small heart beat more quickly as he shared that excitement. His amber eyes dilated, making the world a brighter place, clearer and more sharply defined in its light and shadow and movement. A more difficult place for an enemy to hide in.

Ace's face was beautiful to Chick, held taut with concentration and full of life. The cat couldn't see shapes and details the way a human could but he detected dynamic relationships and read the nuances of movement with great skill. He could sense the life burning more strongly in Ace as she beamed all her attention towards the gate.

Clearly, that was the direction of the enemy.

6

The thought of the enemy, the thought of a fight excited Chick. He dreamed for a moment of moon-haunted combat on the rough dark surface of night-time walls, claws sunk into soft brick, holding fast to provide purchase for quick hot explosions of battle, for the slice and slash of thin sharp claws and fangs.

As the dreamy fury of combat swept through his metabolism, Chick imagined he could taste blood in his mouth. His whiskers trembled, anxiously reaching out, striving to sense and measure the world.

His delicately furred ears twitched and swivelled, and saliva gathered in his mouth. He'd detected the sound of a squirrel. His mind flooded with memories of hallucinatory vividness, memories of crashing past grey branches, claws curving with savage perfection of aim into a small muscular body, teeth tearing the fur and crunching small delicate bones as the hot bloody taste of squirrel filled his universe.

Chick emerged from the hot all-consuming memory and followed the direction of Ace's gaze, drawn by the force of her concentration. His ears swivelled and tightened. There were three different kinds of breathing that Chick could hear coming from the gate. This was the

breathing of the enemy.

At the thought of the enemy Chick's excitement became almost uncontain-able. He pressed down hard, letting his beautiful sharp claws emerge from the plump pads of his paws, revelling in the length and keenness of them. He stretched the slender and powerful muscles of his shoulders and hips and held them taut. He turned his small head to look at Ace. And that was when the terrible thing happened.

Chick could hardly believe his eyes. Something in Ace's manner and posture was changing. Softening, relaxing. Before Ace even knew it herself, Chick realized there was no real danger.

Although Ace had hardly moved, although she was still holding the gun, some subtle change in her posture told Chick she had relaxed. Subconsciously Ace had decided the three intruders at the gate presented no threat. Now her conscious mind was catching up with her intuitive decision and she was lowering the gun, standing up from the concealment of the fountain and walking towards the gate.

Chick arched his spine in disgust and disappointment. There was to be no fight!

He twitched and turned his back on Ace. Stretching casually to hide his outrage and fury, Chick sauntered across the dry bed of the fountain, jumped with effortless grace onto the rim, then down to the lawn where he disdainfully trotted away from Ace and the intruders. He was going to sulk.

'Hello.'

There was a man and a girl standing outside the wrought iron gate, looking 7

at Ace as she approached. It was the man who had spoken. The girl who stood beside him might have been a teenager but he looked at least in his thirties.

He was big and massively pot-bellied, his fat face framed with lank greasy ginger hair. He had a ragged moustache and beard and the pink vein-broken complexion of a heavy drinker.

The girl was looking away from Ace, face in profile and Ace saw she was wearing odd circular earrings, hanging well below the lobes of her ear. They were strange flat discs in black and white, a yin-yang pattern. But the black and white shapes were rabbits, their bodies

interlocked as if in a drawing by Escher. There was something wrong about these earrings. They were utterly motionless instead of swaying when the girl moved and after a moment Ace realized they weren't earrings at all. The black and white rabbits were tattooed onto the flesh of the girl's neck.

Now the girl turned and looked directly at Ace. She had a Slavic face, blunt and coarse. It should have been ugly but her cheekbones were broad and sensual and her lips were rich and full. Her dark feline eyes looked sulky and truculent under sharp dark brows. Ace realized that the girl's cheeks were pitted with acne, old scars that were almost impossible to see now because of the tattoos.

'Hello,' said the girl to Ace.

In the centre of her forehead, where the third eye is supposed to lie and where caste marks are traditionally painted, she had a tattoo of a cluster of bright red flames. Rising from it was a dark bird, wings spread. A phoenix, thought Ace.

On her left cheek was a bright red angular dog, running, tongue lolling.

On the right, a sinuous blue Siamese cat stretched luxuriously. These tattoos were quite skillful, simply but vividly rendered, the posture and motion of the animals entirely convincing.

The tattooed dog and cat seemed to be watching each other, warily exchanging stares across the girl's face, as if they were considering venturing out from their safe shelters under her eyes to meet beneath the nose.

'Hello,' said Ace, and the girl smiled at her. Under the girl's broad sensual lips there was a bright butterfly, oddly coloured in splashes of lavender and green. The colours reminded Ace of something but she couldn't remember what.

The wings of the butterfly were spread in flight as if it were rising from her chin. At the base of her neck Ace could just see the slanted green eyes of a tiger peering out above the swell of her full, freely swinging breasts.

'My name's Shell,' said the girl, speaking to Ace through the wrought iron bars of the gate.

‘As in seashell,’ said the man. ‘That’s hippy parents for you. She has three brothers, and they’re called Rainbeau, Conan and Tao.’

‘No I don’t,’ said Shell. ‘No they’re not.’

‘I only exaggerate slightly. My name’s Jack. And this is Sheba.’ He patted the glossy black dog with a braided red collar that lolled at his feet, ribs heaving.

‘We apologise for disturbing you like this.’ He held up the chisel and hammer which he had been using on the large padlock that sealed the iron gate. ‘I hope I haven’t damaged the lock too badly.’

‘It looks like I got here just in time,’ said Ace, inspecting the scratches on the mechanism.

‘On the contrary,’ said the man, ‘I never had any intention of trying to break in. I was just trying to set off an alarm and get you out here. It seemed to take an awfully long time. I must say I’m a little disappointed in the security around here.’

‘I had to get dressed,’ said Ace.

‘You shouldn’t have bothered for my sake,’ said Jack, eyeing the gap where Ace’s black kimono had come untucked exposing a patch of bare, flat, sun-tanned belly above her jeans.

‘We’ve come here for a purpose,’ said Shell, interrupting Jack’s gloating appraisal of Ace. ‘We need to talk to you.’

‘It would have made it considerably easier for us if you had some kind of bell for people to ring,’ said Jack. He was reaching into the pocket of his checked shirt for a folded piece of paper, suddenly businesslike.

‘Perhaps we don’t like visitors,’ said Ace.

‘I do tend to get that impression,’ said Jack, looking at the gun in Ace’s hand. These two were so clearly unthreatening she felt a little embarrassed holding it now.

There was a faint sound in the long grass behind her and Ace turned to see that Chick was prowling towards her. The slender ginger cat had forgiven Ace for the lack of excitement earlier and had come to investigate.

Ace tucked the gun back into the waistband of her jeans and bent over

to kneel beside Chick. But instead of stroking the cat she began to delve in the long grass beside the wall, a few metres from the gate.

She picked up what appeared to be a stone, pale, mottled grey and about the size of a large potato. She opened the underside of it and took out a key.

'Fake rock,' said the man on the far side of the gate. 'How ingenious.'

'He's being sarcastic,' said Shell.

'Nothing but high-tech counter-intrusion measures here, mate,' said Ace.

She fitted the key in the lock and unlocked the heavy old gate. With the man's and girl's help she swung it open and winced at the creak of its rusty hinges.

9

Emerging from the shadow of the tall gate, Ace stepped into the sunshine of Allen Road. She saw the road sign on the brick wall across the narrow lane and noted that, for the umpteenth time, some idiot graffiti artist had changed the second L in Allen to an I.

Still, at least they'd left the sign on the gate alone this time. Up until recently it had been daubed with the words, BEWARE OF THE GOD.

'We've brought you this,' said Jack. He handed Ace the folded scrap of paper. It was some sort of handbill with a map printed on it. The sort of thing you handed out to publicize an outdoor concert or party. 'We're giving them to everyone in the area,' said the tatooed girl.

'That map shows the location of a laboratory just outside Canterbury,' said Jack.

'Laboratory?' said Ace.

'Animal experimentation,' said Shell. 'We've come to warn you.'

'To warn everyone around here. You're in their catchment area.' The bearded man pointed at Chick, who was rubbing his whiskered face against the edge of the iron gate. 'Any cats or dogs they find wandering loose they'll pick up and kidnap. Use them for their experiments.'

'Vivisection,' said the girl. 'The pharmaceutical companies have all

these new drugs to test.'

'And for some reason, torturing animals always seems to be part of the scientific method,' said Jack. The big man was getting angry and Ace found herself beginning to take a liking to him. He was a leering slob but at least he was a slob who cared passionately about something. She wondered if he cared as much about his tatooed girlfriend.

'Well, thank you for the warning.' Ace folded the handbill and put it in the pocket of her jeans. She scooped up Chick and hugged him to her. 'We'd better keep an eye on you,' she said. 'No venturing out into Allen Road.'

'We wanted to give you this as well,' said Shell. She came close to Ace.

She was holding out her hand. In it was a small white pill. Ace suddenly felt a little uneasy. Shell was so close that Ace could smell her – a mixture of patchouli, sweat and something else. A faint smell like liquorice.

Ace suddenly felt peculiar in a way she couldn't quite identify. It was a moment of *déjà vu*, almost. An intense awareness of the here and now, the strangeness of the instant. She felt as though all this had happened before.

Chick the cat was suddenly heavy in her arms. She could feel the life beating strongly in his small solid body, the firm pulsation of his heart vibrating against her bare arms, passing into her body and somehow altering the rhythm of her own heart. She felt a sudden flood of affection for the cat, this small living thing in her arms. The uniqueness of him and the fierce joy in his sheer naked existence.

10

The tattooed girl was peering into her face and Ace could see that she was spaced out, her pupils wide open. She was obviously stoned. She reached through the iron bars to caress the cat then pressed the tablet into Ace's hand.

'It's for him.' She nodded towards the house. 'It's very special. I saved up for a fortnight to buy it.'

'It wasn't a fortnight, Shell,' said the man. 'Don't overdo it.'

'Give it to him from us,' said the girl to Ace, ignoring Jack. 'Please. A gift.

A token of our respect.'

'It is good gear,' added the man grudgingly.

'Our gift to him,' repeated the girl.

'All right,' said Ace, preparing to move away from them, the tablet in her hand. She didn't like this sudden weirdness.

But Shell was already wandering off, drifting towards the sleek black dog.

She bent over to rub its head.

The dog lolled at her, tail patiently twitching. She glanced back at Ace. 'Is he here?' she said quietly. She was staring past the trees towards the distant house.

Ace turned to answer her but at that moment Chick wriggled in her arms, struggling to get free. Ace and Jack both stood back as the cat twisted out of their hands and leapt to the ground. With an unearthly yowl he fled away across the lawn.

In the same instant the black bitch began squirming and scratching furiously at her ear with a hind paw. She whined in an agonized fashion. Shell knelt to comfort her as Jack stared after the fleeing cat.

'What's going on?' said Shell. A faint breeze stirred the roadside dust at their feet.

'He's here now,' said Ace.

Walking back towards the house Ace saw Bernice Summerfield approaching from the line of trees at the north of the grounds. They met at the ruined summerhouse. 'Hello, Benny,' she said.

'Welcome home,' said the taller woman. 'I heard you went to stay with some friends?'

'Yeah. In London. By the river. It was a nice place. And they've got a baby on the way.'

'Rather them than me,' said Benny.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Ace. 'Now and then I get stirrings.' They turned and walked back towards the house together.

‘Been for a walk in the woods?’

‘It was lovely. I was going to wake you up and ask if you wanted to come with me, but you were completely out of it.’

11

‘I’m all right now. And the Doctor’s back.’

‘I know,’ said Benny. ‘I saw Chick scarpering.’ The small cat was following the two women as they walked up the gravel drive towards the front door.

Benny paused and scooped him up. ‘He never seems to get used to it.’

‘Who does?’ said Ace as they stepped into the cool shadow of the house.

Back in the breakfast room Ace’s coffee and croissants were waiting for her.

‘Well cold,’ she said, pushing them aside.

‘I’ll fix some more,’ said Benny, going back into the big kitchen.

‘Make sure you get the right bag from the fridge,’ said Ace. She sat down at the cluttered table and saw that someone had been to the newsagents.

There was a copy of a garish magazine lying open, face down. The cover read SERIAL KILLERS WEEKLY – FREE GIFT THIS ISSUE: LITTLE-KNOWN WAR

CRIMINALS, SPECIAL COLLECTOR’S CARD TO ADD TO YOUR SET.

‘What’s all this, then?’ she said, showing the magazine to Benny as she came in with the fresh coffee. ‘Who ordered this nonsense?’

‘The Doctor. But it’s not the magazine he’s interested in, it’s that thing that came with it.’

Ace picked the brightly coloured card off the magazine cover. She stripped the cellophane wrapper off it. On the front of the card was a painting of a woman. Above the picture were the words NUMBER 28. THE MATA HARI OF CHEMICAL WARFARE. At the bottom it gave the woman’s name: LUDMILLA SEREBRENNIKOV.

Benny took the card and turned it over. She and Ace leaned over to read the brief paragraph:

Ludmilla Serebrennikov stole certain secret documents from the Soviets before becoming the mistress of a Gestapo officer in charge of the German chemical warfare effort. Towards the end of WW2

she had made her way through the lines back past the advanc-ing Russian forces. But then her luck ran out. . . Continued on card 47: Hank Harrigan, architect of the CIA's MK/Ultrahuman research program. Collect the entire set!

They turned the card back over. The painting showed an impossibly voluptuous woman with shoulders stretched back in a provocative pose.

'Look at that. She doesn't need chemical weapons. She can kill them with her tits.'

'There's more,' said Benny. She picked up the magazine and shook it. A yellowing piece of newspaper fell out onto the table. Benny smoothed out the brittle old cutting and Ace read it over her shoulder.

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In the final part of this series Abel Lexington reports from behind the Iron Curtain. (Continued from page 3.)

The Red Beauty Meets Her Destiny in the Dark.

Ludmilla Serebrennikov, the treacherous and voluptuous siren, flourished both in the iron grip of Stalin's dictatorship and under the corrupt jackboot of Hitler's Germany. She achieved the remarkable feat of defecting from Uncle Joe's Russia to Hitler's Third Reich and then, when Adolf's luck changed, defecting back again.

The beautiful Ludmilla always knew which side her bread was buttered, whether it was a Russian platzel or a sour loaf of German rye. When it became evident that one side was losing, Ludmilla simply switched to another.

Small matters like justice, honour, love, patriotism or personal loyalty never bothered the voluptuous, sinister, black-haired Russian seductress. These concepts had no place in the keen mind lurking behind those beautiful ice-blue eyes. She used men and discarded them.

Ludmilla's career began with Russia's vicious Stalinist secret service in the 1930s. Her assignment? To seduce and win the trust of a brilliant young scientist who was deemed to be disloyal to the Communist regime. This Ludmilla did with ease, insinuating her way into the scientist's heart and laboratory. The evil beauty stole the secret formula his family had been jealously guarding for generations.

Abandoning the secret service colonel who had groomed her as his protégé, the treacherous ice-eyed *femme fatale* headed west with the secret chemical formula. She chose a tall red-haired young officer as her protector – at least as far as the border. Waiting there was another young officer, of the Nazi variety.

The red-haired Russian ended up in a shallow grave and Ludmilla ended up in a fast car heading for Berlin, where she was to become the toast of Hitler's soirees and tea parties. It was here that the intellectual elite of the thousand year Reich gathered to plan their conquest of the world – and the extermination of their enemies.

Chemistry was Ludmilla's speciality and she had soon attached herself to one of Hitler's leading military industrialists. The secret formula she brought out of Russia may have had blood on it but that didn't put the Nazi scientists off.

Ludmilla used the formula to bargain herself into a position of 13

power and prestige among the military research cabal who devised the Führer's weapons of terror. Hell-devices like poison gas and deadly germ agents.

And there were rumours of other weapons, mind drugs, strange chemicals that could warp men's thoughts and beliefs, tearing their sanity asunder. No chemical secrets that could be prised from nature were too obscene for these monsters to use against men, women or children.

The red siren's secret formula was thrown into the sinister bubbling cauldron of the Nazi war effort. And as the German war machine rolled across Europe, she lived the life of a princess in a corrupt kingdom.

Champagne flowed and sparkled like the jewels around the slender pale neck of this sinister black-haired beauty. She was the toast of the intellectual elite. Hitler himself arranged a present for her birthday. The scientific specialists who made the Reich's precision optics and ground lenses for the Luftwaffe presented Ludmilla with a pair of

spectacles, said to be the most exact prescription ever made for human eyes. But as soon as the tide of war began to turn against Hitler, Ludmilla packed her spectacles, collected her personal fortune (always kept in the form of diamonds) and began making plans for her own departure and survival. As the western front collapsed and the Nazi war machine crumbled, Ludmilla escaped through the curtain of fire that surrounded Berlin and fled –

back east again.

Re-entering the Soviet zone she took with her samples of the same chemical she had originally stolen, its hellish recipe perfected by Hitler's skilled technicians. Possessing this to barter with, and of course her own beauty, Ludmilla was soon back in a position of power. Ludmilla's particular talents were again in demand as the Reds began to use all fashion of diabolical chemicals in their brainwashing experiments.

But Stalin's Russia was too austere and impoverished to capti-vate the sensual ink-eyed lynx for long. Within months she was arranging a secret deal with a young American OSS officer called Hank Harrigan. A new life beckoned in the land of plenty.

In the last days of the war Ludmilla had seen the German rocket scientists striking deals with Uncle Sam and she saw no reason why she couldn't do the same.

There was only one fly in the ointment. She had attached herself to one of the leading Russian scientists, who continued research 14

into the strange chemical that had already cost so many lives.

But the scientist was now deemed disloyal by the Party elite and he was scheduled for execution in one of their ruthless purges.

Just as Hitler's death camps were being shut down by the advanc-ing Allied troops, so Uncle Joe Stalin was stoking his own hell ovens.

Scientists and intellectuals were being fed into the maw of this extermination machine. And with her scientist discredited, Ludmilla was in danger of joining the queue for the death camps.

Guilt by association.

So she struck one last deal. The night before she was, due to leave for America she arranged with the KGB to hand over the scientist. She

would trick him into giving himself up, thereby proving her loyalty. She would trade him for her freedom.

The scientist thought he was accompanying Ludmilla on the train going west. He believed that she loved him and that they were going to start a new life together in the golden land of the USA.

At midnight in the crowded bustling station yards of the railway terminus, Ludmilla made her move. Leading the trusting scientist deep into the chaos of the twisting railway tracks, she delivered him to the rain-coated agents of the KGB. When he realized what was happening, the scientist made a futile break for freedom. He didn't make it, but in the struggle Ludmilla's glasses were knocked off and crushed underfoot.

The treacherous Soviet siren was otherwise unharmed and she watched with cold detachment as her lover was led through the freight yards to be put on board the train that would carry him to a mass grave in the east. She felt no sorrow as she turned away, to catch her own train, to freedom and wealth.

But this was where the raven-haired Ludmilla's luck ran out.

Because her ice-blue eyes were almost blind without her spectacles. Somehow in the steaming maze of the railway yards she took a wrong turn. Somehow she made a mistake. A fatal and final mistake.

In that dense steaming darkness, amidst the chaos and clamour of huge machinery, Ludmilla boarded the wrong train.

Instead of going west, she ended up being carried east, towards Stalin's death camps. And once on board that train there was no way off again. And once in the camps there was no reprieve or escape, even for one as resourceful as Ludmilla. Helpless and near 15

blind, she joined the masses scheduled for extermination.

Ludmilla had woven her final betrayal.

'Serves her right,' said Ace. She turned the old newspaper clipping over. On the other side there was a photograph of a smiling family dressed as if for the beach. They were peering through sunglasses at the distant shape of an atom bomb cloud.

Ace realized with a sudden chill that this was the same old piece of newspaper that had been lining the cutlery drawer for years. She

looked at Benny.

At that moment there was a small sound from the kitchen. They spun around to see the Doctor standing in the doorway. He smiled.

'It's always the article on the other side which is most interesting, don't you find?'

What had once been stables on the estate had been converted in the 1920s into a garage large enough to house a dozen automobiles. Now over half of the space was devoted to the ever growing sprawl of the Doctor's workshop.

Ace sat on one of the benches, swinging her feet. Benny sat on a polished wooden chest on castors, a chest big enough to be a very large coffin but which, with a bit of luck, merely contained an assortment of tools. In her lap she had an oven glove from the kitchen, a bright orange piece of quilted fabric in the shape of a smiling camel's face.

She stuck her hand in it and held the glove up towards Ace, wiggling her fingers and making grotesquely leering camel faces at her. But Ace didn't notice. Benny turned to see what she was looking at.

Under one of the bare light-bulbs the Doctor was studying an opaque red plastic envelope marked with a double-headed eagle and large letter-ing which read IF FOUND RETURN TO INTERNATIONAL DRUG ENFORCEMENT

AGENCY. CLASSIFIED. DO NOT OPEN. UNAUTHORIZED OPENING OF CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS WILL RESULT IN MANDATORY CRIMINAL PROSECUTION AND IM-PRISONMENT OF MINIMUM 30 YEARS AND POTENTIALLY A SENTENCE OF DEATH

AS PROVIDED FOR UNDER TERMS OF MARTIAL LAW BY THE CONNORS AMEND -

MENT: 5373/dd/f000912.

The Doctor held the envelope up to the light. 'Either of you two got a letter opener?' he said.

'No, but I brought the oven glove,' said Benny.

'Thank you. I don't need that quite yet.' The Doctor tugged at the red plastic envelope. 'First things first.'

‘Doctor, are you sure you should open that?’ said Ace.

But the Doctor was busy, searching through a deep drawer on one of the big wooden workbenches. ‘Don’t worry about the letter opener,’ he said. ‘I’ve 16

found something else that will do.’ He took out a rusty old pair of garden shears and neatly sliced open the edge of the red plastic envelope.

‘Oh well,’ sighed Ace, ‘maybe we’ll be able to seal it up again.’

‘It’s not like you to be so unadventurous,’ said the Doctor, spilling a fat sheaf of white papers out of the envelope. The topmost sheet slipped off the pile and off the bench, falling to the oily concrete floor. Ace hopped down to pick it up.

‘That’s thirty years in jail,’ said Bernice as she touched it.

‘Or a death sentence,’ said Ace. As she put the sheet back with the other papers she saw that it was embossed with the same double-headed eagle and the IDEA logo.

At a newspaper-covered bench nearby, the Doctor was now switching on a selection of small electrically powered devices. One of these looked like a small coffee grinder. Another was a metal disc hinged like a clam shell with an assortment of thin, brightly coloured wires trailing from it. The wires terminated in a broad, flat bus cable which connected to the third device, a small-screened computer like a first-generation Apple Mac.

‘Do you have that pill, Ace? The one our visitors gave you?’

‘Right here,’ said Ace, hopping down from the workbench again so she could get into the small change pocket on her jeans. Trapped there in the warm folds of cloth was the tablet which Shell had given her. Ace nervously dug it out. She’d completely forgotten about it. An aspirin would have crumbled to powder in there but the small white pill was still perfectly intact. It felt faintly warm to the touch as she handed it to the Doctor.

‘Thank you.’

After the Doctor took it from her Ace sniffed her fingers. They felt slightly greasy and smelled strongly of liquorice. Ace remembered that scent on the girl, mixed with the smell of excitement and patchouli.

She felt a brief swoon-ing memory of that odd moment earlier. She remembered the warm weight of the cat in her arms. Where was Chick now? Ace remembered the warning about animal experimentation, about kidnapping teams, and she felt a momentary flash of apprehension. But there was Chick, prowling casually through the shadows of the garage.

The Doctor consulted the stack of confidential papers, rifling through them quickly and discarding a dozen of them casually in a bin full of oily rags. He selected one of the remaining sheets and carried it over to the small computer.

He set the sheet of paper down and hit the space bar on the computer keyboard. A command line appeared and the Doctor began tapping figures in, occasionally glancing at the paper. The screen of the computer came to life, showing a jagged line in bright luminous green. The glowing line reminded Ace of the cardiac trace on a machine in a hospital. In this case, it looked as 17

if the patient was dying of a violent heart attack.

The Doctor was examining the small pill Ace had given him. He took a clean handkerchief out of one pocket and spread it carefully on the dusty, paint-spattered newspaper. The handkerchief was made of some strange, lustrous red material. The small white pill seemed to glow against its folds. The Doctor reached into another pocket and took something out. Ace saw that it was the bag of dried mushrooms from the refrigerator.

‘These were picked in Russia in the late 1930s.’ With the manner of a conjuror the Doctor turned back to the workbench, opened the metal clam shell. He crumbled the mushrooms in the sealed bag, rolling it between his lingers. Then he opened the bag and spilled the powdery fragments into the metal clam shell. Ace noticed he was careful not to inhale any of the powder.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Watch this.’ He closed the clam shell and sealed it carefully before pushing a button on the lid. ‘Don’t touch it,’ said the Doctor.

‘No fear,’ said Ace.

‘It’s getting very hot.’

‘I can see,’ said Benny. The clam shell was indeed glowing cherry red.

‘What’s it doing?’ said Ace.

‘Quiet,’ said the Doctor, leaning over the computer. There was a sudden flash of activity on the screen. A graph was being traced on it, a sharply spiked green line.

‘Very interesting,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now can you pass me the oven glove please, Benny?’ Bernice handed the Doctor the smiling camel glove and he pulled it on over his left hand and went back to the workbench. Using the glove he carefully popped open the red-hot metal clam shell. Inside there was no trace of the mushroom powder, no ash. Just gleaming metal, still glowing a faint orange.

‘That is annoying.’ The Doctor was frowning.

‘What?’ said Ace.

‘I’ve never seen that happen before.’ The Doctor bent closer to the clam shell device, peering into it.

‘What?’ said Benny.

‘It’s supposed to leave a residue for further analysis. But as you can see the mushroom has oxidized completely. Maybe it’s a system malfunction.’

He checked the wiring then shrugged. ‘No. Everything seems to be fine.

It must just be an anomaly. A one-in-a-million occurrence. Oh well, that’s Cybertechnology for you.’ He set the clam shell back on the bench and picked something up between his fingers.

‘Now this,’ said the Doctor, ‘this is the tablet our friends at the gate so kindly provided.’ He put it into the clam shell and repeated the procedure. A new graph was being traced on it, just above the jagged line. The new graph was 18

bright red. It flashed into existence over the other line, precisely following its profile, matching the highs and lows almost exactly. ‘Very interesting. And this time we should have a residue for further analysis.’ The Doctor picked up the oven glove and opened the clam shell again, hunching over it. Ace heard him sigh.

‘This really is most irritating.’ Ace and Benny came and peered over his shoulder. The glowing metal bowl was completely clean and

empty. The Doctor sighed again. ‘Something isn’t right here,’ he said. ‘Still, never mind.

We should be getting the printout in a minute and that will tell us a lot of what we need to know.’

In a distant corner of the garage there was a sizzling sound as an ancient dot matrix printer started up.

The Doctor continued checking the clam shell until it had finished printing, then went over and tore off a sheet of perforated paper. He showed it to Ace and Benny. The printout was covered in small squares like graph paper. On it, in ancient cubist computer type it said:

CHEMICAL ANALYSIS

0.0

0.0

0.0

0.0

0.0

0.0

ANALYSIS BOUNDARY VIOLATION

NO TRACE POSSIBLE

NO TRACE POSSIBLE

ANALYSIS COMPLETE.

‘What’s going on, Doctor?’ said Benny, studying the printout. But the Doctor didn’t reply. He had turned back to the computer on the workbench. ‘Very strange,’ he muttered.

On the screen the graph traces were still glowing but the image had begun to distort. The tall green trace near the top of the screen was sinking and growing more rounded, stretching along the horizontal axis, as if it was being pulled at either end. Below it the red trace was becoming distorted in an almost identical way.

As they watched, both the traces sank and smoothed out until they were perfectly straight, like the flat-line readout on a dead patient.

'Is it supposed to do that?' said Ace.

'No.' The Doctor sounded disgusted. 'The graphs are supposed to remain steady on the screen until I cancel them.' The blank screen glowed on his face.

'They should remain stable for years if necessary.'

'What were you analysing?' asked Benny. 'The chemical composition?'

'Something like that. Did you get a clear look at the screen before the traces faded?' Both women nodded. 'Well, what did you think?' said the Doctor.

'Same basic shape,' said Bernice.

The Doctor frowned thoughtfully. 'The resemblance certainly seemed to fall within the parameters of acceptable error.'

'You mean it's the same drug,' said Ace.

'Yes.'

'That tablet I got today and that old mushroom from Russia.'

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. Ace thought that he looked angry. 'At least we know that much.'

There was a long moment of silence in the dark garage. It was Bernice who finally broke it. 'What should I cook for supper?' she said.

'Don't worry. I've brought something,' said the Doctor. 'It should do for Ace and myself.'

'What about me?'

'I'm not sure you'll actually have time to join us.' He handed Benny one of the documents from the confidential IDEA file.

'That's thirty years in prison for you too,' said Ace as Benny read it.

'Or death.' Benny turned the page over. 'Doctor, this is blank. All it's

got on it is the letterhead for the International Drug Enforcement Agency.'

'Exactly. It shows the address of their headquarters,' said the Doctor, searching through the pockets of his jacket. 'That's all you need,' he said, taking out an envelope containing red and blue airline tickets. 'And these.' He handed them to Benny. She studied the flight details.

'New York?'

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor. 'They'll give you supper on the plane.'

Chapter 2

There were three women in the small apartment: Miss Winterhill and the two girls who were keeping the Mayans company.

At first Creed thought both the women with the Mayan brothers were hookers. Then he revised his opinion and decided that one of the girls was actually the older brother's regular girlfriend. And yet he could have sworn he'd seen her before, out on the street somewhere, turning tricks.

Maybe, he decided, she used to pursue that line of work and the older brother had been a john and they'd hooked up together. Maybe they were in love. Maybe it was a true drug dealers' romance.

Girlfriend, whore, thought Creed; in these circles the dividing lines tend to blur. In fact, everything was beginning to blur. He had been smoking boo all afternoon and he felt that quite soon he might begin to melt pleasantly into the couch he was sitting on. The younger Mayan brother wouldn't like that; he was very proud of the leather couch, as well as of the tubular steel armchairs and the coffee table.

The table was made of a big rectangular block of shatterproof glass poised on small black feet. Creed stared with detached interest through the chunky prism of it at his own feet, muddy combat boots visible on the floor through the assortment of junk on the table.

There were several beer bottles on the table, mostly empty now, with gnawed wedges of lime stuffed in their necks. Beside the beer bottles was a handgun, apparently made by a Belgian manufacturer, although Creed couldn't identify which one. The gun was remarkably light because most of its frame and moving parts were made of plastic, to

avoid triggering airport alarms. It was a smuggler's weapon.

Next to the gun on the table were several bright sheets of paper printed with photographs, torn from a magazine. From where Creed sat, the pictures appeared to be abstract shapes of golden brown and bright blue.

On closer examination they turned out to be photographs of beautiful young women, limber and tanned, posing with pornographic frankness under some blazing tropic sky. The pictures had been folded and in the sharp creases were traces of white powder detectable against the contrasting deep blue of sky and smooth brown of beach and skin.

Creed picked one up, licked his finger and rubbed it across the paper, leav-21

ing smears of saliva on the girl's body. He lazily traced her legs, collecting the white powder on the tip of his finger.

Coming through from the kitchen the short young guy called Russell saw what he was doing. Russell was the Mayans' runner; their errand boy. He nodded and smiled at Creed, eager to like and be liked. 'Coke is a pretty lady, huh? It should always be wrapped up that way.'

Creed smiled back. 'Going somewhere?' he asked. Russell was putting on a jacket.

'Downstairs to take delivery of the pizza from the pizza guy. The elevators don't work and he won't come up.'

'How untrusting of him,' said Creed. Creed could see that Russell didn't quite get the joke but he laughed promptly anyway; eager to please. Russell nodded to everyone in the small living room and went out.

'If he's not back in five minutes, count me out of this deal,' said the black man called Larner.

'Give him ten,' said Miss Winterhill. 'That's a lot of stairs he has to climb.

You'd think they could get the elevator going in this place.'

'Tell me about it,' said Larner. He was sitting in an armchair opposite the couch, with the coffee table between himself and Creed.

The third woman, Miss Winterhill, sat in the matching armchair, close to one of the tall windows. Behind her the New York skyline seemed to ripple and shimmer and for a moment Creed wondered if this was the effect of smoking too much boo. Then he remembered that all the windows in this building had been blown out in some kind of civil disturbance years ago.

Tenants had only recently moved in to reclaim the wreck. The whole place had been gutted and converted into small condominium units for affluent young business people who worked in the city. The younger Mayan brother was one of them and, although he had spent fifty thousand dollars on furniture, he hadn't got around to replacing the glass yet, in much the same way as the building's owners had put in expensive wood-inlaid floors but failed to repair the elevators. Instead of glass the windows had temporary sheets of transparent plastic film stretched and heat-sealed over them.

Watching the plastic twitching in the wind, Creed put his finger in his mouth and lazily rubbed the last of the cocaine into his gums. Then he drank the dregs of one of the beers from the table. A pleasant numbness was spreading above his gums, a happy variation on the feeling of being at the dentist. He leaned across the coffee table and smiled a wide stoned smile at Larner.

Larner ignored him. The black man was clearly uptight, chain smoking. But Creed didn't mind that. Larner basically seemed to have his shit together. He was the owner of the plastic gun on the coffee table – surrendered as a gesture of goodwill.

* * *

22

Larner couldn't keep still, constantly shifting around in the armchair, full of nervous energy, but that didn't bother Creed either.

Miss Winterhill, on the other hand, was sitting motionless, not smoking, not drinking, utterly composed. Creed's impression of her was of a rich, tight-assed bitch who lowered the tone of what was otherwise a perfectly respectable drugs deal.

The younger Mayan brother came into the living room holding a bottle of cava.

He opened it with a dramatic popping of the cork and poured three glasses, handing one to Miss Winterhill, setting another in front of

Creed, who was still working his way through the left-over beers, and took the last one over to the black man. ‘Hey Larner, relax,’ he said. ‘You look tense.’

‘That’s because I am tense.’ Larner whipped the cigarette out of his lips and discarded it, flicking the butt neatly into a pottery ashtray that Creed thought looked pre-Columbian before immediately lighting another one.

Larner inhaled smoke and lifted his cigarette. He pointed at the city that lay beyond the billowing plastic of the high window. ‘See out there? My family are out there waiting for me.’

The Mayan brother listened patiently. ‘Right now they know I’m in the middle of a dope deal somewhere,’ said Larner. ‘My kids want to know if I’m going to come back and take them to a movie or if I’m going to end up with my guts spilled out in a dumpster behind some restaurant.’ Larner took a deep drag on the cigarette and let the smoke bleed out of his nostrils. ‘So don’t give me any of that “tense” shit.’

‘But you left your gun on the table, Larner. That must mean that you trust us.’

‘I trust you not to kill me. I’ve got to. That’s a business risk. But you could still turn out to be the cops or the IDEA.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Creed could see that the mere mention of the IDEA had made the Mayan very uneasy. Fair enough.

Creed only knew as much as your average dope dealer about the International Drug Enforcement Agency. For all its media coverage it was a highly secretive organization. Essentially, Creed envisioned it as a huge, well-oiled operation, cleared through the participating governments at the highest level.

It maintained its policy of secrecy even with the local police authorities, and was therefore universally hated by them. But even more hated by the drug dealers.

With the local cops at least you had a chance of being taken alive. IDEA had no hesitation about coming in as a paramilitary force, taking control of a building where a deal was in progress and executing everyone involved. No 23

arrests, no trials. No paperwork. Leave the local authorities to clean up the mess afterwards.

‘Yeah, right, ridiculous.’ Larner wasn’t letting it go. In fact, Creed could see that his impatience was turning to anger. ‘This whole thing could be an IDEA set-up. Big undercover drug bust.’

‘Hey, come on, Larner. You’re making the lady tense now.’

‘Good for her. To me that shows brains. It’s my own attitude. Like I said, I could end up rich or dead. I could also end up doing life in prison. That’s the other possibility I didn’t mention. So that’s what I’m saying. In this situation tense is smart. Tense is healthy.’

‘Well, you’ve certainly raised the room temperature with your little speech,’

said the younger Mayan, pouring himself the last of the cava.

Creed grinned. It was true. The sheets of plastic film stretched across the windows were fogging up, steamy and opaque, as everyone inside began to sweat, thinking about the possibility of a bust or the even messier possibility of a double-cross.

Creed took a deep breath. There was a smell that he couldn’t quite identify.

It was faint yet pervasive, hanging in there at the very edge of his awareness.

It mingled with the smell of the people sitting in the small warm room.

‘Chill out, Larner,’ said Creed through a cloud of boo smoke. He leaned across the big glass coffee table and passed the roach to him and Larner accepted it, pausing in the process of smoking his cigarette long enough to suck the roach to a small red-hot coal and finish it off.

‘I just want to get home to my family, man,’ said Larner after holding the smoke in his lungs for a long moment. Then he returned to his cigarette. He looked at the Mayans. ‘When are we going to get this deal rolling? You said you had something special for us.’

‘That’s right. Very special,’ said the older Mayan, coming out from the bedroom with his girlfriend on his arm.

The hooker wandered out after them. Creed had been waiting to get another look at her. The girlfriend eased away from the older Mayan and sat on the sofa next to Creed. The hooker, after searching the

room briefly for somewhere to sit, perched on the edge of the coffee table, also near Creed.

He drained the last of his beer, speculating on just what the hell had been going on in that tiny bedroom.

The strange smell was stronger now, drifting through the apartment. He felt on the verge of identifying it, but then it slipped away from him. Creed took another deep breath. It was an odd, itchy spiciness that triggered memories of childhood.

And then he had it. Liquorice. A smell like liquorice.

24

There was a sudden sound. Everyone in the room froze as the front door opened, and then relaxed again as Russell the runner slipped back in with an ingratiating smile. He was carrying a stack of big flat boxes with spreading grease stains on them. The pizzas had arrived.

The girlfriend got up from the couch and went into the gleaming stainless steel galley kitchen to help serve up. There was the sound of her reading the printout on each box to identify the pizzas inside, then a quizzical tone. She'd spotted that the pizza people had made a mistake in the order.

Then there was the sound of Russell apologizing for a mistake that wasn't even his fault. And then of the girlfriend, not previously bothered, getting angry, spurred on by Russell's humble apology.

Listening to the voices, echoing oddly and distantly, Creed suddenly felt vertiginously stoned. The taste of the cava was strong in his mouth, as though the wine had been the final chemical trigger for this strange state of mind.

The voices were rising and falling, ringing off the hard surfaces of the small galley kitchen. Creed couldn't actually make out any of the words. He was purely following the tone of voice and he was surprised at how accurately he could chart what was going on.

There was the low angry buzz of the girlfriend reprimanding, followed by the whining sound of Russell abasing himself some more. Creed grinned.

Antics in the human zoo.

Now Creed could hear the tinkling sounds of cutlery and plates.

The

younger Mayan brother had taken the girlfriend's place on the leather couch.

He leaned forward, the couch creaking under him, and jerked his thumb towards the kitchen.

'Give them a hand,' he said to the hooker.

'If you want me to perform catering it's extra,' she said. She crossed her legs and remained sitting on the glass slab of the coffee table.

Creed liked the girl's attitude. She made some tiny adjustment of her position and her knee bobbed into contact with his. The momentary touch lit Creed's brain up like a neon sign and he felt an involuntary surge of desire.

He was mildly astonished that he could feel any such thing surfacing through the confusion of drugs in his system.

Creed wondered if the contact had been an accident or carefully contrived.

The hooker was quite deliberately looking away from him now, giving him her profile, clean curve of nose and full bloom of red lips. Either way, Creed decided, she knew exactly the effect she was having on him. She was Cuban or some kind of Latino, a gutter beauty, her skin a warm shade of *café au lait*.

More or less Anna's colour.

Creed felt desire, pain and memory twist in his viscera in a strange tangle of emotion.

The Mayan brother sitting beside him seemed unaware of the chemistry between Creed and the girl, or maybe he just didn't care. Creed wondered which of the brothers was renting her services. Maybe it was the older Mayan, who remained standing by one of the tall windows, seemingly relaxed and in full command of the situation.

Russell and the girlfriend came back from the kitchen with bright triangular slices of pizza steaming on expensive white plates. Russell

darted around the room dispensing the food, a cheerful, servile waiter. He was like a puppy, so eager to please that it was painful to watch.

Creed had been surprised that the Mayan brothers had hired someone like Russell, until he realized the kid was their runner rather than their muscle.

He would do all the deliveries – delighted to take the risks – and would be painfully, apologetically meticulous. He was so ostentatiously honest that everyone was beginning to suspect him of ripping them off.

Creed saw the kid as an eager gofer doing his job meticulously and simultaneously digging his own grave. He was probably puzzled because he wasn't getting promoted more quickly, scratching his head and wondering what he was doing wrong. Creed doubted if the kid even carried a gun. The Mayan brothers no doubt had their own, and it made good sense to keep the number of weapons in the situation down to a minimum. It gave them control.

'I wish we'd ordered Szechwan,' said Larner, inspecting his plate with disgust. 'This Italian shit is full of yeast, which breeds in your system, and tomatoes.'

'What's wrong with tomatoes?' said Miss Winterhill.

'They're in the deadly nightshade family, right?' said Larner. 'Packed with natural toxins.'

'That's why we got yours with extra topping,' said the older Mayan, chopping a piece of pizza with a fork and shovelling it into his mouth.

'Look, how long do we have to hang around here?' said Creed. The sudden sharpness of sounds and smells in the room was beginning to bug him. His own piece of pizza was lying untouched on its plate. Creed thought it looked like something left over from the autopsy of an alien life-form.

He was coming down from the coke and the energy flowing between him and the hooker was beginning to make him feel fretful and nervous in a way he didn't care to identify. Creed was getting twitchy.

Larner, on the other hand, was now relaxed and expansive, leaning forward to wolf down his wedge of pizza, consuming it hungrily with no further complaints and no apparent sense of irony. It was as if he and Creed had abruptly swapped attitudes.

Creed had finished the cava without noticing he'd drained his glass. Now he was restlessly lifting the beer bottles off the table as if they were tall glass 26

chess pieces, looking for residue to swill. As if picking up on his nervousness, the hooker got up and went out of the room.

Creed watched his hands shake as he searched through the beer bottles.

Things were beginning to move too quickly for him. A flood of sense impressions were racing through his mind, faster than he could analyse. Sounds echoed metallically in the room. Everyone's movements seemed a little jerky.

And there was that all-pervading subtle liquorice smell.

Now the small room seemed hotter than before. Creed was sweating pro-fusely. So was everyone else. The room was heavy with the various smells of their aftershave and perfume. But, over all, the liquorice smell. Creed's heart was racing. Maybe he was doing too many drugs of too many different kinds.

He knew just what he needed. He needed to calm himself down. Creed reached for the boo and a cigarette lighter. That would do the trick. As he inhaled the resinous smoke he suddenly realized that he wasn't sure whether he had spoken a moment ago, or whether he'd just imagined it. 'When is this stuff going to arrive?' he said.

'Maybe it arrived just now,' said Larner. 'A little delivery with the pizza man.

Very tricky.'

'No, it arrived a couple of hours ago.'

There was suddenly silence in the room and everyone looked at the older Mayan.

'Julie here brought it,' he said, grinning, drawing his girlfriend to him. He was making a big show of kissing her when the hooker came back through from the kitchen, carrying two bottles of beer and a church key bottle opener.

She timed her arrival so that she had to brush past the couple and break up their big romantic clinch. Neatly planned, thought Creed.

‘’Scuse me,’ said the hooker, crossing the room and sitting down on the coffee table again near Creed, her knees touching his. She popped both the beers and handed one to him. The slender glass of the bottle was cool in his hand. They sipped the beers, relaxed and easy. Larner and Miss Winterhill, on the other hand, were suddenly tensed up again. It was as if there was a wave of anxiety that was circulating in the room, visiting each of them in turn.

Larner was setting his pizza aside and wiping his mouth with the back of a clenched fist. You could see he was getting angry. ‘You mean to say you’ve been keeping us waiting and the merchandise has been here all this time?’

‘Security,’ said the younger Mayan.

‘And we’re going to keep you waiting some more,’ said his brother. He led his girlfriend to the door of the apartment and kissed her again. The girl went out and he turned back to face the people in the room.

‘I’ve got the merchandise all right,’ he said. ‘But I’m not even showing it to you until Julie phones and tells us she got out of here without being picked 27

up by the police.’

‘Christ,’ said Larner, looking at his watch, a vintage platinum Omega. ‘I’m supposed to be taking the kids to a movie. Can’t we just get on with business?

There’s such a thing as being too paranoid, you know.’

But it was clear the older Mayan wasn’t going to budge. ‘There’s no such thing as being too careful,’ he said.

On the whole, Creed sympathized with him. He thought it was a sensible security measure.

While Larner and the older brother were arguing, Creed excused himself to go to the toilet. ‘Too much beer,’ he said, smiling at the hooker. She smiled back at him, her face lighting up. Then the expression on her face abruptly changed.

Creed had got up from the sofa. Now he glanced back, and found to his astonishment that the younger Mayan was pointing a gun at him.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To take a leak,’ said Creed. ‘Is that all right?’

‘No it isn’t,’ said the younger brother. ‘Sit back down.’ The gun was steady in his hand, pointing at Creed at waist level. If he fired now the bullet’s trajectory promised a gut wound and a painful and none too swift death.

But all Creed felt was the smouldering beginning of a powerful rage. He felt his chin lifting with anger as he locked eyes with the Mayan. A small portion of his mind remained cool and detached and it was saying that maybe this brother had been watching him and the hooker and had picked up the chemistry between them and now, ridiculously enough, was jealous.

But the rest of Creed’s consciousness was vanishing into a violent hot clarity that promised action at any moment. He was more than willing to believe he could get his hands on the Mayan before he could use the gun. And if he could do that –

But both Larner and the older brother could see the confrontation taking shape, could read the danger and promise of violence in Creed’s posture.

They were suddenly on their feet, smiling and laughing to defuse the situation, separating the two men, leading the kid brother into the kitchen and Creed back to the couch.

The older Mayan was gently easing the gun out of his brother’s hand. ‘But he could be a narc,’ said the younger brother. His voice continued, the angry whining tone remaining, but the words were blotted out as he was dragged into the kitchen.

In the living room Larner was patting Creed on the back, kidding around and grinning to bring him back from that point of focused rage.

The hooker had shifted onto the couch now, sitting at the opposite end from Creed with the middle cushion between them. She was watching him 28

with absolute attention, silent and wide-eyed. Enjoying the show.

Larner dug into the pocket of his leather jacket and dug out a small plastic object like a tiny salt shaker. It was a ‘bullet’, a cocaine dispenser for discreet public use. He offered it to Creed and Creed put it up each nostril in turn, pressing the release mechanism and snorting

the coke deep into his sinuses to be absorbed by his mucous membranes. He handed the coke back to Larner, who inspected its diminished level with mock horror.

'You have to come over to our house for dinner sometime, man,' said Larner.

'Meet the family.'

Creed was beginning to feel the after-effect of the confrontation. With the passing of the rage and the onset of the coke he could feel his voice becoming shaky and emotional. 'You really mean that?' he said.

'Sure,' said Larner. 'We need your nose to clean the carpet.'

The older Mayan came back into the living room, leaving his kid brother in the kitchen and closing the door behind him. Just before he closed the door they could hear a querulous voice call from the kitchen. 'He could be going into the bathroom to radio his cop buddies.'

The older brother looked at Creed and shrugged apologetically.

'Can I take that leak now,' said Creed, 'before my bladder busts?' He could taste the bitter drip of the cocaine gathering at the back of his throat.

'No problem,' said the older Mayan.

Creed went into the gleaming chrome and white bathroom and shut the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the bath and lifted up his shirt. His torso was slick with sweat but the bandage was still in place.

He tore it loose and removed the small radio from inside the adhesive pad.

He pressed the button that automatically locked the signal onto the wave-length used by the team waiting in the van outside.

'There's a girl coming out of the building,' he said, speaking quietly, mouth close to the transmitter microphone. 'She should be emerging any minute now. Don't, repeat do not arrest her. If anybody approaches her it'll blow the whole operation. If she is in any way aware of a police presence we're in trouble. Am I making myself clear? We have to let her go.'

He waited for acknowledgement from Chavez in the command van then switched the radio off. He stood up from the edge of the tub and for a moment was sickeningly dizzy.

He gathered his balance slowly, standing weaving in front of the mirror.

The cocaine was opening like wide gentle wings in his head. But there was some other sensation, too, something unfamiliar. Not the boo or the wine of the beer. Creed wadded the bandage and threw it into a bin beside the toilet.

Then he lifted the lid off the cistern.

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He tucked the small flat radio inside, underwater, positioning it carefully where it would be concealed by the flushing mechanism but wouldn't interfere with its action. He only just remembered to flush the toilet before going back into the living room.

The older Mayan smiled and nodded at him when he came out and returned to his place on the sofa. The angry kid brother was still sullen but Creed got the impression he had suddenly cheered up for some reason.

The hooker shifted over to make room for Creed as he sat down. Their legs grazed again.

'I've been hearing a lot of things about it,' Larner was saying. 'Some good, some bad, but all interesting. I'm eager to get my hands on some and find out what the true story is.'

'I hear you can screw all night on it,' said the younger Mayan, glancing over at the hooker. He was definitely perkier for some reason.

'I've heard it's a drug for mind games,' she said, cutting him dead.

'Yeah,' said Larner. 'A young person's drug, all right.' He smiled, his teeth a brilliant white. 'You know sometimes I worry I'm getting out of touch. Getting old.' Creed knew exactly what he meant. He liked Larner.

'I can't stand the music kids listen to,' said Larner. 'And I can hardly keep track of these weird drugs they use. I wouldn't even know what

they were calling this one if its name wasn't spray-painted on half the walls in this city.'

'Yes,' said Miss Winterhill. 'When I first saw it I thought it was referring to a person.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Creed, 'but it's a good name for a drug.'

'Warlock.'

'It sounds scary, but interesting.'

'Probably some marketing ploy,' said Larner. 'They probably paid some con-sultant a lot of money to come up with it.' He looked up at Creed. 'Where did you first hear about it?'

And then, for some reason, the room fell silent and everyone in the room turned to look at Creed, waiting for an answer.

The truth was, Creed had first heard about the drug one winter morning, coming into the old precinct house, its walls washed with bright reflected snow light. He'd sat in Chavez's office and Chavez had looked up wearily from his computer screen and said, 'There's a new player in town, and it's bad news.' He'd passed Creed a surprisingly thin police information file with a couple of terse declassified IDEA memos attached.

That had been almost a year ago.

'Oh, you know,' said Creed. Everyone was still looking at him, waiting.

For a moment he had the horrific stoned belief that they could all read his thoughts. Maybe he was giving himself away by the expression on his face, 30

some obvious anxiety they could read in his body language.

'On the street somewhere,' Creed said. His own voice rang oddly in his ears.

Was he babbling? 'I don't remember exactly. But I was certainly intrigued as soon as I heard about it.'

Larner chuckled. 'You really are a total dope fiend.'

Creed found himself calming down, smiling at Larner. 'Well, I

wouldn't say that. But I can hardly wait to try some.'

'You already have,' said the younger Mayan brother. Now this little shit was smiling, too.

Creed and Larner turned to stare at him. Miss Winterhill was frowning at the other Mayan, waiting for an explanation. 'What's he talking about?'

The older Mayan shrugged. 'He's right. We've already taken a dose of it.

Don't blame Sorbelio. I only just told him about it in the kitchen.'

No wonder the little shit was so happy. This was his revenge on Creed. 'You slipped us warlock without telling us?'

'Why look so worried? You were going to try some anyway.'

'How did you administer it?' said Miss Winterhill calmly.

'It was dissolved in that cava you guys drank. And of course Sorbelio and I had already taken some in tablet form.' The Mayan nodded at his brother.

'Well, I'm not sure I like this,' said Larner. He made no move to reach for the gun but Creed could see him checking its position on the coffee table, preparing to make a grab for it if necessary.

Creed's own hands were hanging loosely between his knees and now he casually reached under the cushion on the couch. He could feel the reassuring contours of his own gun, a police Python he'd stashed when he first came in.

'This is not good,' Larner was saying. 'This is no way to conduct business.

You don't just slip someone a tab of something without telling them.' He was angry but keeping a lid on it. 'We never know about the purity or strength of these new drugs.'

'That's not the biggest worry you've got,' said the younger Mayan. You could see he was enjoying it, delivering another surprise.

'What do you mean?' said Miss Winterhill.

'I don't want to be too dramatic about this.' The younger Mayan

grinned.

He was loving it. ‘But there is a traitor in our midst.’

His older brother was more serious. He interrupted. ‘We’ve had a report from a reliable source that someone involved with this deal is working with the police. Or maybe with IDEA.’

Creed’s heart surged in his chest.

‘No one kept me abreast of this situation,’ said Russell, a querulous hurt tone creeping into his voice. ‘I’m a junior partner in the business and I should 31

have been informed.’ Everyone ignored him, as you would a child trying to break into a serious conversation among grown-ups.

‘To put it simply,’ said the older Mayan, ‘somebody in this room is working for the cops.’

‘I may be just a junior partner but you should have told me.’ Russell was trembly and whining. Petulant.

‘You may be the undercover cop,’ said the Mayan briefly, then ignored him.

Now everyone in the room was casually trying to keep an eye on everyone else. Paranoia was heavy all around them. They weren’t meeting each other’s gazes directly, but tensely watching out of the corners of their eyes.

The hooker, Larner, Russell, Miss Winterhill and the Mayans. So damn many people in the room, and any of them could turn lethal at any moment. Creed felt sweat running freely down his ribcage, a creepy-crawly sensation. ‘So why have you doped us with warlock?’ he asked. To his own surprise his voice was level and calm.

The older brother smiled at him, a sort of apologetic smile. Creed realised that the Mayans had no idea who the cop really was. This guy certainly didn’t suspect him. Maybe he was the only one in the room this guy entirely trusted.

And maybe that was something he could use.

‘This warlock is an interesting product,’ said the older brother. ‘I first heard about it from a scientist we hired. He did the pioneering work

on the fifth-generation smart drugs.'

'The nootropics,' said Miss Winterhill.

The Mayan nodded. He seemed eager to answer the question, to show off his knowledge. 'Apparently it's a compound that's been around as long as acid.

Maybe longer. It's naturally occurring, not a synthetic.'

'Oh well, that's a relief,' said Miss Winterhill sarcastically. 'So long as its natural.'

'Some people say it's derived from a cactus; others say you get it from a mushroom, like acid.'

'That's not strictly LSD you get from fungi. It's ergot,' said Miss Winterhill.

She was rising in Creed's estimation. They should all be freaking out now, but she seemed detached and cool. Showing an intellectual interest, trying to keep the discussion on a nice casual level. Good idea. But Creed thought she was more nervous than she looked.

'Whatever,' said the Mayan brother. He was getting angry; pissed off because Miss Winterhill knew more than he did. 'There's lots of different stories about warlock. No one seems entirely clear about where it comes from or what its chemistry is. No one has managed to analyse it properly yet, let alone synthesize it. They say the CIA first brought it into this country in the 1950s.'

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'So what?' said Larner. He was staring at his gun on the coffee table. 'What's this about one of us being a cop? If that's true, then I want out.'

'It's true, I'm afraid you've got to stay for the rest of the show. But don't worry, everything is going to be fine.' The older Mayan smiled. 'Unless you're the cop, that is.'

'We're going to nail the bastard,' said his brother. 'We're going to find out who he is.'

'He or she,' said the older Mayan.

The hooker and Miss Winterhill exchanged a look. 'How do you

propose to do that?' said Miss Winterhill.

'By using warlock,' said the younger Mayan. 'That's why we doped you with it.'

'You're not making sense,' said Creed. But he could feel a growing chill in his stomach.

'This is a very interesting drug,' said the older brother. He nodded at the hooker. 'You were right. It's a mind drug. But it has a highly unusual effect, especially in group situations.'

Miss Winterhill was frowning with concentration. You could see a sharp mind working flat out behind those eyes.

'I remember reading about ecstasy,' she said, 'it was the first drug since alcohol that had a major use in social contexts. Big parties. Raves. Concerts. It seemed to have a synergistic effect when a number of people used it together.'

'Group high,' said Larner. 'Contact high. You don't even need everybody to be on the drug for everybody to feel stoned. It's psychological.'

But Miss Winterhill didn't seem convinced.

'The music was a big part of that scene, too,' said Creed. He kept his voice natural and conversational. If the Mayan didn't believe he was the cop maybe he shouldn't believe it himself. Maybe he could fool them by camouflaging himself with the right mind-set. The right beliefs.

'Music was a factor. So was smell,' said Miss Winterhill.

'Smell?' said the hooker.

'It was noticed right from the start that a room full of people dancing on ecstasy had a certain odour. A distinctive smell from the sweat of the people who had taken the drug. But it took a long time for researchers to realize that this was a component of the drug's action. The smell of other users increased your own high. It was a chemical messenger process, like pheromones.'

'You know your drugs,' said the older Mayan grudgingly. 'But you ain't seen nothing yet. Sorbelio and me have been playing around with warlock. It has some interesting effects. Very interesting.'

His brother nodded. ‘And the cop in this room isn’t going to like it one bit.’

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‘Warlock is going to help us find out who this cop is. We’ve all taken the drug and soon it’s going to take effect. That’s how we’ll find him.’

‘Him or her,’ said his brother, looking at Miss Winterhill and the hooker.

‘Hey, I’m out of here,’ said the hooker. ‘I’ve done what I’ve been paid for. I don’t want any of the rest of this.’

‘Shut up and sit down,’ said the younger brother. ‘I wouldn’t put it past IDEA to send a girl to screw me then really screw me.’

‘Screwing you is one thing I won’t be doing again,’ said the girl coolly. ‘Believe me.’ But Creed could tell she was scared. Some barely audible tremor in her voice gave her away.

The plastic on the window was flapping in the wind and for a moment its rhythm seemed to contain as much meaning as the rise and fall of a human voice. That was what Creed thought, and he could tell by their flinching reaction that some of the others thought the same thing.

Creed felt very strange. There was a new drug having an effect on his mind and he had no idea what to expect. The others seemed to be thinking similar thoughts.

The mood in the room was increasingly unpleasant. It was like normal stoned paranoia intensified by a factor of ten. Their faces were strained and unhappy, eyes darting around, afraid to look at each other. Their bodies were hunched and tense. The hooker sat on the coffee table, knees together, feet splayed on the floor. She had her arms folded across her breasts, hugging herself. Her face was the face of an unhappy child. She shivered.

As if mirroring the mood of the room, the sun faded in the windows, swallowed by a huge wall of drifting grey cloud. The room was cheerless and shadowy now and everyone seemed to be shivering. It had started with the hooker and now it was like a yawn passing from person to person.

‘But I don’t really understand,’ said Miss Winterhill. Creed wished she’d shut up. Her cheeks were flushed. She looked hot. In fact, Creed

was beginning to feel oddly warm himself. The room had begun to feel stuffy and overheated.

It was as if the shiver that had passed amongst them had marked a sudden shift in temperature. ‘How can the drug help you find the policeman?’ she said.

‘Just think of it as a seance,’ said the older Mayan brother. He sat down at the far end of the dim living room, cross-legged on the floor. ‘We have summoned the spirit of warlock.’

The plastic on the window flapped again, shifted by the billowing night wind of the city.

It sounded even more like a voice this time.

Chapter 3

The tattooed girl called Shell was standing waiting by the gate on Allen Road when Ace arrived.

Chick the cat was strolling back and forth, rubbing his lean body against the wrought iron bars. Shell reached through to stroke him and the cat rocked back on his haunches, purring and pushing his small head up to meet her caressing hand. Ace felt this was somehow an act of disloyalty on Chick’s part.

She walked past the dry fountain towards the gate, her feet scuffing on the sparse gravel of the driveway. It was a cool grey evening and the wind was whispering in the branches above her. Ace paused and watched the girl playing with the cat, waiting patiently outside the gate.

Ace felt a sudden wave of antagonism. She came up to the gate and put her hand on the cold iron bars. Before she could say anything the girl looked up at her and said, ‘You’re angry at me.’

‘No I’m not,’ said Ace. But she was taken aback; it was true. As she came closer she could see that Shell’s pupils were wide and dark. She was high on something again. Under the scent of patchouli, Ace caught the strange liquorice smell as before. ‘I just wish you wouldn’t keep setting off the alarm.’

‘I’m an uninvited guest. I’m sorry. It’s the only way to call you down

from the house. I hope I didn't interrupt anything important.' Shell looked at her with those wide dark eyes. The tattoos were bright splashes of colour stretched across her broad cheek bones. Ace couldn't take her eyes off them.

'They tell a story.'

'What?' said Ace.

'My tattoos,' said the girl, stroking the cat. Ace felt the hairs on the nape of her neck stir. 'Is he here?'

Ace didn't need to ask who she was talking about. 'I can't keep track. He comes and goes. But in any case he's always very –'

'Busy,' said Shell. 'Did you give him our message? About the animal experimentation labs?'

'Yes,' said Ace, more curtly than she'd intended. In fact, she hadn't said anything to the Doctor. The scrap of paper was still folded in a pocket of her jeans. She'd simply forgotten.

Shell regarded her with wide, knowing eyes. 'So, what did he say?'

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Out on the road beyond the girl a battered green and white Volkswagen van approached and rumbled to a halt. At the wheel Ace could see the man called Jack. He beeped the horn and fluttered his fingers at Ace and grinned. In the back of the van the wedge-shaped head of Sheba, the sleek black dog, was pressed against the window, dark eyes staring out at her.

'He said he'd think about it,' lied Ace.

'Thank you for your help,' said the girl.

'No problem,' said Ace quickly.

'Here, this is for you.' Shell passed something else through the gate, holding her hand out to Ace. It was a folded piece of glossy paper.

Ace took it. 'Thanks.'

Shell didn't reply. Jack popped the door of the van open and she stroked Chick one last time before turning and going to the vehicle to join him. The small cat yowled, annoyed that the attention had

ceased.

‘Come on, Chick,’ said Ace. She started back up the driveway towards the house. She unfolded the glossy piece of paper. On one side there was nothing but printing, small type with a lot of exclamation marks. Ace couldn’t be bothered to read it. She turned the paper over to see what was on the other side.

She wished she hadn’t.

On the other side was a colour photograph. It was a close-up shot of a cat, obviously in a laboratory somewhere. Someone had immobilized the cat’s head in a sort of metal clamp and then they’d –

Ace had to stop looking at the picture. Her mouth was dry and her stomach shifted greasily.

She was angry. She was always angry when someone tried to manipulate her emotions. She tore the picture up, wadded the fragments into a tight ball and threw it into the dry bowl of the fountain to join the other rubbish.

Chick jumped into the fountain, chasing the piece of paper as if they were playing a game. Ace thought about Chick being in a situation like the one in the picture and her stomach heaved again. That made her angrier than ever.

She turned back towards the house. ‘Nothing like an open mind, is there?’

The sudden voice made her jerk guiltily. She stopped and looked back at the gate. The man called Jack was standing there.

‘What do you mean?’ Despite herself, Ace found she was drifting back down towards the gate. Over the man’s shoulder she could see Shell playing with the black dog in the VW van.

‘You could at least read the other side before you throw it away.’

Ace felt herself flush with sweat. Guilt was turning to anger. ‘What exactly do you want from me?’

‘From you, nothing. It’s the man in the house we want to see.’

‘I told the girl. He’s not at home.’

‘Not at home or just not at home to callers?’ Ace said nothing. The man shrugged and smiled at her. ‘Why are you in such a hurry to get away from me? You got a hot date?’

‘Yes,’ said Ace. ‘With a sandwich.’ She turned to go as Jack spoke again.

‘What’s in it?’ he said.

‘Mushroom, cheese, lettuce and tomato.’ Ace didn’t want to stand by the gate talking but she found it hard to just turn her back on him. It seemed rude. Somehow it would make her feel in the wrong.

‘Mmmm. The old MCLT,’ he said.

Ace had encountered men like this before, chatting her up in bars, on buses, on lonely rural station platforms waiting for the last train. They had an odd, gentle knack. You found yourself drawn into conversation with them even when you didn’t want to be. You kept thinking: Any minute now I’ll stop talking, but before you knew it, you were going home with them.

Jack smiled at her through the bars of the gate. ‘You a hard-core vegetarian?’

‘No.’

‘Just a fellow traveller, maybe. Tempted and sympathetic but not quite committed. I know how you feel. Vegetarianism is a nice idea but so is a double cheeseburger with the works.’

Ace was mortified to hear her belly rumble, primal and loud in the quiet evening stillness of the garden. Jack smiled but didn’t say anything, not ignoring it but not teasing her either. He just seemed to want to spare her the embarrassment and Ace couldn’t help liking him for that.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I used to feel the same way. But then I had this insight.

Cruelty to animals is part of a continuous spectrum. All these terrible forms of human behaviour are linked. They’re part of the same thing. The same problem. From bullfights to gladiatorial competitions. And when you begin to think that way it gets harder and harder to order your next salt beef sandwich.

You know, the kind where they serve it warm and greasy on good pungent rye bread with butter melting on it and a dollop of sweet mustard and a nice sharp-tasting pickle on the side.'

Ace felt herself blush as her stomach growled again. At her feet Chick the cat howled in chorus. Hanging on the gate Jack grinned at them.

'Well, at least I can still eat the pickle,' he said.

'I've got to go now.'

'Well, give the man our regards.'

'I will.'

'And maybe you'll give him something else from me.' Jack reached into his shirt and took out a plastic bag with a small dark object wrapped in it. He put 37

his hand through the bars of the gate, showing it to her. The thing in the bag was an odd mottled colour. Splashes of lilac and green. Ace recognized the pattern.

'It's a mushroom,' he said. 'But I suggest that you don't put it in your sandwich.' He ran a thumbnail along the seal of the bag and opened it. Suddenly Ace could smell that heavy liquorice pungency. It was so strong her head swam.

She remembered how Shell smelled, and the same odour on the pills the Doctor had tested. She remembered how badly he wanted another sample and she thought of Benny halfway around the world, labouring to get him one.

Ace put her hand through the bars of the gate, reaching for the plastic bag.

But Jack drew it back.

'Don't worry. You can have it,' he said. 'But only as part of a deal.'

'What's the deal?'

'You come on a little ride with us.'

'No way.'

'Come on. I won't try and rape you and I can probably extract a

promise from Shell along similar lines.'

'No.'

'Come on. What else have you got to do? Are you washing your hair? We just want to take you somewhere. You'll see some things that will open your eyes.'

'I don't think so.'

'Okay. You don't have to come. You have a choice about whether your eyes get opened or not.' Jack nodded towards the fountain where Ace had thrown the photograph. 'Unlike the poor cat in that picture.'

The Doctor was sitting in the kitchen, inspecting the strange glass shapes he kept in the box of electrical components. The ones nobody was supposed to touch. He didn't respond as Ace came in and said hello. She could see he was lost in thought. 'Listen,' she said, 'I'm feeling a little restless. I'm going to take one of the cars for a spin if that's okay.'

'Drive carefully,' said the Doctor, looking up at her with his cool, level gaze.

The old wooden door of the garage made a ghastly screech as Ace opened it, using all her weight to drag it through the rust and dirt. She was sweating with frustration by the time she got it open but the Mazda started first go and she was beginning to feel better by the time she reached the bottom of the driveway and got out to unlock the gate.

The VW van was waiting there with Shell and the dog in it.

Jack hopped out to help Ace swing open the tall iron gate. He went to shut it behind her as she drove through but before he could do so a small shape darted through and out onto the street. It was Chick the cat. He sat down on the pavement and watched with interest as Jack gently swung the heavy gate shut.

Ace opened the door of the Mazda and as soon as she stepped out Chick darted inside. Jack grinned as Ace sighed and turned back to the car. 'Come on Chick, get out.'

'Leave him in there. It's an omen.'

‘It’s a pain in the ass. How am I going to drive with a cat prowling around in the car?’

‘Bring him with us. He’ll be a reminder of what this whole thing’s about.’

‘What is it about?’ Ace turned to the big iron gate. She took the key out of her jacket as Jack went over to inspect the Mazda. Chick had made himself comfortable on the back seat. Jack winked at the cat.

‘Nice car,’ he said, running a hand across the smooth red finish of the bon-net.

‘It has its good points and its bad points.’ Ace grunted with effort as she turned the heavy old key in the gate’s lock. Everything in this damned place needed oiling.

‘What are the bad points?’ said Jack.

‘Plastic steering wheel. It makes my hands sweat when I do something dangerous.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t do anything dangerous.’ Jack was watching her, his eyes noting a flash of bare torso as Ace fumbled in her jacket pocket and her T-shirt came untucked from her jeans. Then his eyes widened as he saw the gun she was carrying. ‘Are you planning on using that tonight?’

‘You tell me.’

Jack was obviously shaken by the sight of the weapon. ‘This should be just an observation mission. I’m hoping that the bad guys don’t even notice us. In fact we might be less visible if we just had the one vehicle. Why don’t you leave that thing here and ride with Shell and me?’

‘No chance,’ said Ace. She got into the Mazda and leaned out of the window. ‘You may have guilt-tripped me into coming along but don’t think you’ve earned my trust. As far as I’m concerned you two might be the bad guys.’

‘Okay, okay.’ The man held his hands out as if to stop the flow of her suspicion. ‘You follow us in convoy. Just don’t expect red sports car-type speed from Morrison.’

‘Morrison?’

‘Our van,’ he said, grinning. ‘I’m just an old hippy at heart.’ He winked at Ace and climbed into the Volkswagen.

39

As he pulled away along Allen Road, Ace slipped the Mazda into gear and followed him. The gun was on the seat beside her, in easy reach. Chick shifted in the back and made a small growling noise, as if asking a question.

‘Van Morrison,’ said Ace. ‘He thinks he’s funny.’

Chick made a small disdainful noise then settled down on the seat again.

40

Chapter 4

Outside the skyscraper the wind howled, spinning around the building. Beyond the window New York seemed lost behind roving charcoal storm clouds.

The room was silent except for the pulsing of the plastic on the window.

Like big lungs breathing, thought Creed.

‘The spirit of warlock is coming,’ said the older Mayan. He was nodding slowly, his eyes shut. He looked smaller sitting this way, cross-legged on the carpet. Smaller and somehow humble. The room seemed to be growing darker around him. ‘We’ve invited it to join us. We’ve paid our respects by taking the drug and now warlock will reveal itself to us.’

‘Warlock’s going to enter the room and help us find the cop,’ said the younger brother, his eyes squeezed shut.

Miss Winterhill shifted in her chair. The hooker sat on the coffee table, staring at her feet. Russell stood with his back to the wall, nervously wiping his hands on the tail of his long white shirt. Larner sat as if carved from stone, but a stone you might any moment strike a spark from. The expression on his face was rigid and unhappy.

It could be anger but Creed thought it was a different emotion. He could smell fear in the room. It was beginning to smell like the

precinct house. He sat there in the growing darkness, trying to relax. Maybe he could just ride it out. He stared towards the window, trying to keep his mind calm and blank.

Through the rippling plastic he could see that the afternoon had died somewhere behind the cloud front moving over the city. He thought he saw the first faint splash of rain against the gently bellying plastic.

Then the hooker gave a sharp gasp and Creed's attention snapped away from the window. 'Something's in the room,' she said.

'Shut up,' snapped Larner. 'She's just trying to freak us out, man,' he said to Creed.

'It's started,' said the older Mayan brother.

'It's just a breeze,' said Russell. He was standing tensely against the wall, also looking at Creed, his eyes pleading for agreement.

'A breeze from where?' said Creed. The plastic over the windows was sealed tight at the edges. There was no way for a breeze to get in. But there it was, a distinct chill passing through the rising heat in the living room. Like a cold current in a warm lake.

41

It wriggled, snakelike, weaving amongst them, and you could see the hooker flinch as the clammy air rushed past her. There was sweat on her upper lip. Creed watched her, wishing there was something he could do to help her. She was terrified by the thing happening in the room. Her eyes were bugging with panic. Any minute she might lose it altogether.

Creed could read the signs. But he believed that terror began where your ability to understand things failed. No phenomenon was completely frightening while you could find explanations for it. This witchy wind haunting the room was enough to freak anyone out. But Creed had the wit to begin building an explanation, and he was building right now, for dear life.

He decided that the drug must be affecting the body temperature of each of them. And somehow it was synchronizing their biological thermostats.

Their fluctuations in body heat were in turn nudging the thermodynamics of the room in a strange synergy. The pattern of

changes was causing local variations in the room temperature, creating pockets of warm and cold air. A miniature weather system was building up in the room.

Creed seized upon this explanation. It allowed him to remain calm as the cool breeze made its first slow whipping pass, like the invisible tail of some huge beast sweeping through the room.

Miss Winterhill was thinking something similar, he was certain. She appeared calmly lost in thought, puzzling over the phenomenon. As if sensing this calmness, the wind passed swiftly over her, hardly pausing. It was as if it respected the depth of her concentration and didn't want to disturb her.

As the breeze moved on she looked up at Creed, relief in her eyes. 'It's almost organic,' she said.

'What do you mean, almost?' said Creed. After all, it was being shaped by their minds, and their minds were expressing emotions physically, organically.

This thing was like the blended smell of their bodies in the room; the stink of their fear and excitement come to life. Creed forced himself to concentrate on these thoughts as the wind stirred past his face again. Cold air, full of that strange liquorice smell. Like someone's breath in your face, but cold.

The breeze ebbed, dissipated, then collected itself and moved on. It drifted back towards the far end of the room where the older Mayan was sitting. Like a dog returning to its master, Creed thought. Then he cursed himself.

He was falling into the wrong pattern of thinking. If he began to believe this thing could sniff him out, he might cause exactly that to happen.

Creed wiped sweat off his forehead. Miss Winterhill was looking at him.

She opened her mouth to say something.

'Quiet, you two,' said the older Mayan. 'Respect the presence of warlock.'

He opened his eyes. 'Come on, warlock,' he whispered. His eyes gleamed with excitement. 'Show us who the narc is.'

‘Whoa, feel it go,’ said the younger brother. There was a note of respectful fear in his voice.

The wind was swirling past the brothers and sweeping back towards the hooker again. Creed saw her face crease with anxiety as it approached her.

She was shaking, clutching her arms tightly around herself. Creed felt sorry for her. Unlike him, this girl had no weapons of logic to wield. She looked as if she was about to go off the deep end into the abyss of her own superstition.

The wind stirred around her, circling in a predatory way. It was as if it sensed the terror in her.

Then it struck, whipping past her so strongly it stirred her hair. Creed felt it pouring down the gradient of her vulnerability. Somehow it responded to subliminal emotional reaction in the room. It was a blind worm, drawn hungrily to any weakness.

‘Is it her?’ whispered the younger Mayan.

‘Quiet,’ said his brother. ‘Wait and see.’

The hooker had closed her eyes. She whispered a prayer and dug out a bright pendant from between her dark breasts. A small gold crucifix. She kissed it.

Her face slowly became calm. And with that growing calm the breeze seemed to die down.

Creed wondered if the hooker’s superstition might also be her salvation.

She believed in something. There was something for her to cling to.

For a moment it seemed that the chill wind had vanished from the room altogether, but just as he was starting to relax Creed felt it again.

This time it was probing at him, like the cold inquisitive snout of some beast. Sniffing, sizing him up, probing his defences. It was a distinct cold touch in the centre of his chest.

We are what we believe ourselves to be, Creed told himself. And he manoeuvred that thought like a chess piece to guard his heart.

This thing frightened him but Creed felt himself rising to the challenge. This was just like any other bad trip. When the horrors set upon you, you had to stand up to them. Face the bastards down.

Creed grinned right into the cold air playing onto his face. It was like a breath from a tomb.

But you aren't going to claim me, scumbag, he thought. Creed felt a good hot rage rising in him, warming his chest where the cold had begun to probe at his heart. I am me and I am strong and you don't scare me one bit. I am myself and I live in my skull and my mind is my own and you're not going to use it against me. This is survival time and every single nerve and cell in me is rising to this fight and I will not be bettered in this challenge. In any challenge.

I am myself and I am united against any threat. This is the moment where my life is in danger, and every part of me is united against you. So go sniff at someone else.

The heat of rage and hate rising in Creed's body was focusing forcefully.

The cold air in front of him ebbed, broke up, and withdrew. It swirled around the room.

'This is unbelievable, man,' said the younger Mayan.

'Shut up,' said his brother, and Sorbelio took it like a slap on the face. You could see that some childhood conflict had been triggered, awoken vividly from the past. The expression on the kid brother's face was one of infantile hurt and injustice. Suddenly the cold air was spiralling together into a solid mass again and flowing straight towards him.

Creed was familiar with the different worlds created by different drugs.

Each one produced its own alternative sensory reality in the mind and with years of experience he could find his way around these strange perceptual places. Each drug had its own signature or personality. Like different entities with different characteristics. Now Creed felt he was beginning to understand a new entity. He was getting the measure of warlock.

The drug heightened interpersonal signals, but it didn't guarantee that those signals were authentic. It was like a lie detector, responding to emotional reactions. But like a lie detector it responded to anxiety without being able to interpret the cause of that anxiety.

A smart drug, but not that smart.

The older Mayan stared in astonishment as the wind flowed back across the room. He couldn't believe what was happening. The warlock phenomenon seemed to be pointing to his little brother.

The kid himself seemed about to panic as the cool breeze circled him, moving steadily like a slow spinning miniature tornado. The wide collar of his black silk shirt stirred and lifted as if the wings of a dark predatory bird were rising at his throat.

But then the young Mayan rallied. 'Hey, what's going on?' he said. He slapped his collar down. There was fear in his voice but there was anger, too.

'It's not supposed to be coming after me.' The breeze faltered and ebbed away from him. It seemed the kid's feet were too firmly on the ground for him to be panicked into stoned self-destruction.

Creed felt a pang of disappointment. But the young Mayan knew he wasn't guilty and his brother virtually shared his certainty. The two of them formed an oasis of calm in the growing hysteria of the room. The flow of cold air slipped back again, then returned to the visitors, rising. It came sliding back into the room with a renewed vengeance, like a skier accelerating down a slope.

44

Straight towards Creed.

He fought his fear with anger. He concentrated on the Mayan brothers.

They were basically stupid, he told himself. Warlock and its mechanism of action were an occult mystery to them. Even the older one believed it. Despite a bit of technical talk, he had no real understanding of its nature. They were both willing to buy any kind of bullshit voodoo explanation. They just weren't bright enough to begin fitting the drug into the framework of science. So they sold their brains out cheap to superstition.

The breeze passed right over him. Creed repressed a smile. He was right. It responded to fear of any kind. He had successfully fended it off Now it circled restlessly, probing the living room, looking for a weak point.

It hovered over Miss Winterhill.

She stared up at it in total fascination, genuinely interested in this thing.

Didn't she realise the Mayans would kill her if it singled her out?

Creed decided she must have seen some really weird shit in her time to stay so calm. Or maybe she was accustomed to using industrial-strength psychedelics. The breeze faltered, gently fanning Miss Winterhill's calm face, barely shifting a lock of her hair.

Creed decided her trick was having a sharp intelligence and letting it loose on this very strange thing, seeking to understand it even as it challenged her.

And her fascination blunted its attention. It was a good trick and Creed was somewhat envious. She was handling the drug more easily than he had.

But then she has an unfair advantage, Creed told himself. She isn't the one it's looking for. I am.

The instant this thought flashed through his mind, Creed knew that he'd made a terrible mistake. The cold front gathered itself like a muscle and swept towards him, a miniature storm. Everyone in the room felt it.

Suddenly they were all staring at him The older Mayan was startled. His kid brother had the beginning of angry satisfaction on his face. In a moment they would begin to believe that they'd found the cop in their midst.

And of course they'd be right.

Cold sweat jetted down Creed's ribs. The chill wind was whipping round him in a frenzy. The others were staring. Creed fought to keep his self-control, but the stronger everyone's certainty grew, the harder it became to put up a fight.

He could see it in their eyes, the dawning conviction that they'd found

their man. It was as if he was trying to physically fight their belief. And the tide of belief in the room was turning against him.

Creed held on to his courage and his belief in himself. He fought back. He had been here before. It was simply a familiar escalation of stoned horror; the sort of things that turn into a bad trip. And a bad trip could unhinge some 45

people's minds while others could laugh off the experience. Panic was fatal; it was a cascade effect.

What was there to fear? Creed knew he was strong enough to survive any kind of bad trip. No one could play mind games against a man who knew his own mind.

Abruptly Creed felt the steady cold pressure on his chest begin to falter. The thing hesitated. Creed risked a look around the room. Larner had a look of uncertainty on his face. He didn't really believe that Creed could be a narc.

Bless him. Creed used Larner's belief to strengthen his own defences. Now the Mayan brothers suddenly didn't look so certain. He looked at Miss Winterhill.

Mistake. Smart eyes that knew too much. A keen perception that could cut through his smokescreen.

For a terrible second he locked eyes with her and felt her uncertainty about him and knew it was like a weak plank in a long bridge. It might send him crashing through to his death. He'd made a mistake putting any weight on it. But then, miraculously, she dropped her gaze and he was safe from the judgement of those eyes, free to think his own thoughts about himself, to shape his own beliefs.

The cold was still pressing at him, but it was tentative, still uncertain. He'd lost ground, but not much.

He risked a glance at the hooker and he saw fear on her face. But not for her own safety. She was afraid for Creed.

It was beautifully pure and simple. She didn't want anything bad to happen to him. And that simple human look, pure as a flower, was what finally saved Creed. The cold air uncoiled and eased away from him.

Creed relaxed. He'd beaten it.

But something was wrong. The clammy stirring breeze hadn't dissipated. It had just withdrawn. And the room was getting hotter. Everyone was sweating under the strain of the continuing tension. And as the heat grew the pocket of cold shifted more impatiently, swirling overhead, circling the room like a cold slow comet swinging above them.

Creed felt sick. He realised wearily that it was only going to keep on getting stronger, getting worse as the tension grew in the room. And every time it probed his defences the struggle got harder. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

And of course, this very pang of weakness caused the cold air to ripple towards him again, gathering speed. Deadly, like a snake striking. Creed braced himself.

Then the incredible thing happened.

The breeze shot right past him and kept going.

46

Across the room Russell cried out in terror. The breeze was sweeping around him, flapping his baggy white shirt. He lurched away from the wall where he was leaning.

Creed realized that he hadn't seen Russell move an inch since the 'seance'

had begun. He had been hoping that the wind wouldn't notice him. Like a child crossing its fingers and holding its breath. He had been terrified that he would be chosen.

Now his worst fear had come true and he couldn't handle it.

'No, man, no. Please,' Russell cried. He stood in the middle of the room, the breeze dancing around him like a dog who'd caught in intruder. Everyone was staring at him. The Mayan brothers had both taken out guns and were wearing identical expressions of disgust.

Creed had seen people tear themselves up on acid trips, wrenching their own minds apart with panic. But where did that panic come from? Why didn't it happen to everyone? Creed believed that deep down inside themselves, some people must want to have a bad trip. In some way they needed it.

Programmed to self-destruct. Drugs only brought out what was within the individual.

And Creed had also known suspects who confessed to crimes they had never committed. Again, some fundamental psychological weakness left them vulnerable. Perhaps it was self-hatred, lack of self-confidence, a willingness to believe anything bad about themselves. Some of these people even ended up believing that they'd committed the crimes.

Now this strange warlock wind had singled Russell out. It was marking him for a crime he'd never committed. And Russell was crumbling. He knew he wasn't guilty but somehow that didn't help. Russell was too accustomed to being the scapegoat. He saw himself in that light. Now he was drawing the warlock phenomenon to him like a shark to blood.

Russell was a boot-licker. He had always taken the blame for things he hadn't done, apologized for mistakes that weren't his. Somewhere deep in his childhood, links of association had been forged and Russell had come to believe he would be rewarded for a certain kind of behaviour. For crawling.

Now he was going to die for it.

Russell was on his knees. 'It's not me. You got it wrong.' But his whining must have sounded insincere even to himself, because he shut up and began to sob. Creed guessed that he'd been waiting all his life for this sort of ultimate calamity, to be crucified for something he hadn't done. His whole life had been shaped into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Russell was reaping the whirlwind after sowing years of self-hatred and inauthentic behaviour.

'I knew it. I never trusted him,' said the younger Mayan softly.

47

'My God. It worked. You found him.' Larner sounded as if he could hardly believe it.

'Warlock found him.'

Russell tried to whimper a denial but they ignored him.

Creed was shaking with relief. The emotion was so strong he was afraid he might attract the attention of warlock again. Fortunately his

excitement was hidden in the general thrill. The others were certain they'd found the traitor. The swirling temperature flow in the room had gathered itself and was blowing steadily in one direction.

It was as if Russell was standing in front of an invisible window that someone had opened. Out of nowhere, in the middle of the room, a breeze was blowing into his face. His hair twisted and writhed. His face was pinched with fear, eyes squeezed shut as though he was leaning into an Arctic gale.

'I'm not a cop,' he said. 'It's not me.' But his voice was hardly a whisper.

Russell had given up already. He didn't expect anyone to believe him.

Despite himself, Creed felt contempt for the kid. That was safer than pity or sympathy. Safer than any emotion which might draw warlock back to himself.

'Well I guess our seance worked,' said the younger Mayan. He looked at his brother. 'Now we've got to get rid of him.'

'How do you propose to do that?' said Larner.

'Warlock will do the job for us,' said the older Mayan.

'What?' said Larner. 'You're going to give him an overdose?'

'No. Don't be so unimaginative,' said the Mayan. 'We're going to make him fall off the edge of the world.'

Chapter 5

Jack came back from the bar carrying two dark pints of beer and, delicately balanced between them, a fresh gin and tonic for Ace.

'Thank you,' she said. 'This is all very convivial.'

'You bet.'

'Convivial but time-consuming. I thought we had business.'

'Just a quick drink and then we'll set off.' Jack sat down in the dark booth opposite them. 'The labs are only a short drive from here. Our act of urban terrorism can wait.'

‘I thought you said it was just a reconnaissance mission.’

‘Whatever.’ Jack sipped from his pint and set it down on the table, leaving a pale patch of beer froth clinging to his scraggy red beard.

‘You’re saving some for later,’ said Shell. Jack immediately rubbed his face with the sleeve of his shirt, looking sheepish, and she helped him. For an instant the pair seemed to Ace like an old married couple, with their own deeply engraved habits and rituals.

But then Jack grinned and the impression passed; he was too wicked-eyed and mischievous to imagine as an old man. Or a married one. His eyes gleamed at her. ‘Do you know how Shell and I first met?’

‘Do you always have to tell everyone?’ Shell had to shout to make herself heard. The pub was packed and noisy.

Ace approved of the place. Located on a narrow cobbled street near the Westgate in Canterbury, it was small, dark and smoky, with a Chinese paper dragon stretched across the ceiling and Lou Reed strumming resonantly on the juke box.

A crowd of students jostled at the bar and monopolized the dartboard. One of them had a skinny dog with a piece of string attached to its collar sitting obediently by the brass footrail. Ace wondered if Jack and Shell had remembered to leave the windows open in the Volkswagen so that Sheba would be all right.

The glossy black dog was on heat and they’d decided it was wisest to let her stay in the van. Ace had opened the roof hatch on her own Mazda and left Chick curled comfortably on the back seat. Ace had reached down to stroke him before she locked up the car and the small cat had responded to her caress with a lazy, negligent purr.

‘You’re getting repetitious,’ Shell was saying to Jack.

‘You can say that again.’ Jack leaned across the pub table towards Ace. ‘I’ll tell you the story anyway. Shell was working as a checkout girl. At Marks and Sparks here in Canterbury, if you can credit it. She was a respectable girl in those days. Pushing barcodes across the scanner and wearing her little M&S

pinafore.’

‘I’m surprised they let you work there with your tattoos.’ said Ace.

‘They didn’t know I had them.’ Shell rubbed her hands across her face, stretching the skin so the brightly coloured patterns distorted across her broad cheekbones. The dog, the cat, the tiny phoenix and the butterfly all stretched and resumed their contours under her massaging fingers. ‘In those days I only had them on my body,’ said Shell.

‘And what a body it was,’ said Jack. ‘I mean is,’ he hastily corrected himself, and Ace stifled a smile.

‘There were tattoos all over my body,’ said Shell. ‘But they stopped above the wrist and below the neck.’

‘The soul of discretion. Anyhow, there she was working in Marks and Spencer, just up the road from here, and one day I went in to buy something.

I forget what.’

‘Italian bread with herbs,’ said Shell. ‘And some Brie and a bottle of burgundy.’

She looked up from under lowered eyelids, her expression almost shy, gaz-ing across the table at Jack.

‘Stop it, you’re making me hungry.’ He was staring back at her, trying not to smile, almost glowing with pleasure. Ace realized with some surprise that under all the bickering these two were in love.

‘So anyway, I went up to the till with my purchases, not even noticing who was on it. And it turns out to be this spaced-out hippy chick. Oh no, I’m thinking, not another one. You know what I mean, one can only stomach so much of their fatuous idealism and ethnic bangles. I’m praying she won’t stop and lecture me about not using vegetarian rennet in the Brie or that the burgundy doesn’t come from an organic cooperative run by lesbian nuns or something. So she’s passing me the groceries and as quick as possible I’m stuffing them into my bag. Pay and get out of there fast, that’s my basic plan of action. But then she rings up the total on the till and you know what?’

‘You didn’t have enough money,’ said Ace, caught up in the story.

‘Wrong! I had plenty of money. No, the total on the till comes to six pounds and sixty-six pence; six-six-six. Get it? It’s like fate. I’m looking

at the total and then I look at the girl and she's looking at me and I know we're thinking exactly the same thing. I mean, six-six-six. It's like destiny. The number of the frigging beast, right? Here in squeaky clean Marks and Spencer. And I know 50

this is exactly what's flashing through her mind too. And I think, well, this is one spaced-out hippy chick who's got a dark side. Which right away turns me on. So I look at this depraved satanic beauty and stare her right in the eye and I ask her out.'

'No you didn't. I asked you out.'

'Nonsense,' said Jack, burying his nose in his beer as he took a deep swallow.

He emerged, grinning and dripping, licking the tips of his soaked moustache.

'Delicious.'

'You're disgusting,' said Shell.

Jack turned to Ace and winked. 'Oddly enough, that's exactly what she said to me on that day, about thirty seconds after we met. Because the next thing you know she was back at my lodgings, rooting in my underpants with unseemly enthusiasm. By the way, that's him over there.'

The sudden change of subject caught Ace off guard. For a moment she didn't know what Jack was talking about. Then she saw the expression of blank hostility that had formed on Shell's face. Ace followed her gaze and saw a tall young man with long blond hair striding in, ducking as he passed through the low, crooked doorway of the pub.

'That's the guy who works at the labs. I told you that he drinks in here now and then.'

The man pressed through the crowd of young bodies, moving deeper into the small smoky pub. On his way to the bar he brushed past their table and Jack caught his gaze and the two men nodded.

As the blond moved on towards the bar, Shell leaned across the table and hissed at Jack. 'What was that about?'

'Just saying hello.'

‘Saying hello? He works at that place. He does those things to the animals.’

‘So, I bought the guy a beer once.’

‘You did what?’

‘I bought him a beer and had a chat with him. So sue me. His name’s Sean.

He’s from Scotland, oddly enough.’

Shell was clearly furious. ‘Are you going senile?’

Jack smiled at Ace. ‘Shell here believes that things are very clear-cut. Black and white. Dividing lines, and never the twain shall meet. Sort of a yin-yang, like those rabbits tattooed under her ears. But yin-yang with bloodshed instead of balance and harmony.’

‘That man is our enemy.’

‘So of course I should never have a drink and chat with him.’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘To find out what sort of person he is.’

‘We know what kind of person he is.’

‘Shell is very inflexible in her emotions. Once she takes against you, watch out.’

‘What did you have to gain? What if someone saw you talking to him? What if our friends saw you?’

‘They’d think I was enlightened enough to try and make contact with another human being, even if he stands for everything we hate.’

‘I’m beginning to wonder about you.’

‘Listen, Shell, I thought maybe I could get through to this guy. Win him over to our cause without violence.’

‘And did you?’

‘I was making progress.’

‘Progress?’ Shell snorted. ‘Do you know what he’s been doing while you’ve been making progress?’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah.’

Shell turned to Ace, her tattoos standing out in bright contrast on the flam-ing red of her angry face. ‘That man drives the van for the lab. “Driving the van” is a euphonism –’

‘Euphemism,’ corrected Jack.

‘A euphemism.’ Shell spat the words out. ‘What he really does is kidnap animals. If he finds a stray dog or cat he stops the van and lures it inside.

Then he locks it up and takes it away to the labs for experimentation. And you know what that means.’

Ace nodded, making all the appropriate noises. But behind her mask of sympathy she was thinking it all sounded a bit too much like an urban myth.

The animal kidnapper in the special van. If you’re not careful he’ll take your pets away and torture them. She turned to Jack, hoping to see some confirmation of this in a cynical curl of lip or a sardonically raised eyebrow.

But to her surprise Jack looked entirely serious. He glanced over his shoulder to the bar where the tall blond stood drinking a tequila.

Ace noticed that in the otherwise crowded room a space had developed around him at the bar; nobody wanted to stand beside the man.

Shell was watching him as well, a gleam of pure hostility in her eyes. ‘You can’t reason with the enemy. I used to think you could but I found out differently.’ She sipped her beer and turned to look at Ace. ‘One summer I was hitching in France with a boyfriend who was an art student.’

‘Not the art student story,’ said Jack. ‘No old boyfriend reminiscences, please.’

Shell ignored him. ‘We hitched a ride with this lorry driver. It was

dark and I didn't realise what he was carrying in the back. We were on the road before I began to notice the smell and the noise. Do you know what veal is?'

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'Of course,' said Ace, repressing a pang of guilt. She'd ordered it in restaurants enough times.

'Baby beef,' said Shell. 'And that's what was in this lorry. A shipment of calves on their way to become veal. All packed together, moaning and terrified. Don't tell me that those animals didn't know what was going to happen to them. They were shit-scared. Jammed into a dark place, rolling away from their mothers. They knew they were on their way to the slaughter.' Shell drained her beer. 'So I decided to do something about it. When we stopped at a café I slipped out and went to the lorry. I don't know exactly what I was going to do. Unlock the back of the lorry and let the calves out right there, I suppose. But I never got the chance. He caught me. The driver.'

She tilted her empty glass, rotating it, watching the thin film of froth slip around inside. 'Luckily my boyfriend knew what to do.' She glared at Jack.

'He didn't try to reason with him or make friends. He bashed the driver on the head and we stole the lorry. We drove for the miles through the dark until we found a big field and we let the calves out there. You can't imagine the sound they made when they knew they were free. Cries of pure, innocent joy.'

Shell's eyes were dreamy and distant now. 'There was no mistaking it. And when I heard that sound I knew we'd done the right thing. It wasn't easy, but we'd done it. I swore then that I'd never again be ashamed to show what I really felt. I decided I'd show my true colours and not care what anybody thought. So I started getting my pictures.'

She held up her hands and spread her fingers, revealing to Ace eight delicately coloured tropical birds with their wings spread. Ace winced inwardly, thinking of the pain that must have been involved in getting those tattoos onto the tender skin.

'Very stirring,' said Jack. 'But we should really be making a move.' He stood up and slipped on his checked lumberjack shirt. 'Now is the time for action.'

Ace drained her gin and tonic, mostly melted ice by now and only a

wedge of lemon to lend it flavour. ‘I’m still not sure why you want me along.’ She stood up.

‘Oh, come on. You heard what Shell said about the labs.’

Ace eased out of the cramped booth. ‘I mean, I’m sympathetic to your cause.

But I don’t know how I can help.’

Shell gathered up her lace shawl and beaded handbag and slid across the bench after Ace. ‘Don’t even think about that now.’ She swept the shawl across her shoulders. ‘Just come and see this place. Look at it and see what goes on there.’ She turned and walked towards the open door of the pub. Beyond the low, crooked doorway a cool breeze was blowing and a street light glowed against the deep blue night sky.

Jack gestured politely for Ace to follow her. As they left, she noticed that 53

the tall blond was no longer at the bar. He must have left while Shell was talking about him. Perhaps his ears were burning.

The car park was situated beside a small theatre up a winding narrow street.

They approached it, feet resounding on the cobbles in the night-time stillness, the street lights making their shadows crooked behind them. A cool night wind was blowing in their faces. Jack and Shell had found a space for their hulking VW by the wall and Ace had parked her own car near the entrance.

She felt a sense of homecoming when she saw the Mazda sitting there, shining under the sodium yellow of the security lights. She had a sudden longing just to get in and drive back to the Doctor’s house. What the hell was she doing here with Shell and Jack? They were nice enough but she just didn’t share their passion for animal rights.

Ace said, ‘Open up. There’s a good car.’ She didn’t speak loudly but the Mazda recognized her key phrase. It double-checked her speech patterns and then hissed and clicked as its doors unlocked.

Ace smiled as she heard the familiar noise. It was indeed a good car. She knew it was just a machine with a smart computer in it but she had begun to think of the Mazda as a real creature. A blunt, friendly beast who carried her good naturedly along the roads. And did it fast.

Ace reflected that she could just start this obedient beast and slip out into the midnight traffic. Once clear of Canterbury city centre she'd be speeding along the dark curves of country roads. If she put her foot down she could be home in no time at all.

Ace was tired. Did she really want to go on this fool's mission with Jack and Shell? There was nothing she could accomplish by going to look at the research labs. Perhaps it was unfair to lead them on.

Suddenly Ace knew she'd made her decision. She had no intention of helping them to break into a lab to daub slogans on the wall or free caged rabbits just so they could die in the wild. And besides, there was something not quite right about this evening. It was a deep instinctive feeling and Ace couldn't entirely articulate it, but the whole enterprise seemed too tenuous, too vague.

She wouldn't be surprised if the lab had nothing to do with animal experimentation and Shell and Jack turned out to be a couple of harmless but misguided fantasists. Ace simply couldn't believe that the blond in the pub had been some kind of monster. He looked like an ordinary bloke. In fact, she'd quite fancied him.

Resisting the impulse to just get in the Mazda and drive off, Ace turned to give Jack and Shell the bad news. She had just stepped away from her car and was moving towards the VW when she heard Shell scream.

'She's gone!'

'Easy, Shell. Are you sure?'

'Sheba's gone. Look. She isn't in there.' Jack had wrenched open the sliding side door of the Volkswagen and was peering inside as Ace trotted up. She looked over his shoulder. There was no sign of the dog inside the vehicle.

'Maybe she got out.' Jack put a hand on Shell's shoulder.

'How could she?'

She brushed the hand off.

'The door was locked.'

Nonetheless she stalked off, her shadow huge and jagged behind her in the sodium lights. She began to call out for the dog. ‘Sheba! Sheba!’

Her voice echoed off the old stone walls. An elderly couple walking past on the pavement glanced over at her curiously. ‘Have you seen a black dog?’

Shell called. ‘She had a red collar.’ The man and woman shook their heads and hurried on. Shell came back to the VW. Jack was still staring unhappily inside as if he expected the dog to reappear magically.

‘It was him,’ said Shell. ‘That bastard’s put Sheba in his van and taken her off to the labs.’

‘How could he? We locked up before we went into the pub, and the door was still locked just now.’

Shell twisted her face in disgust. Her tattoos writhed, colourless dark shapes in the yellow light of the car park. ‘He’ll have tools. All the tools he needs. I told you. We should never have left Sheba out here. He can break into any vehicle and lock it up again. That’s his job.’

Ace suddenly felt her stomach go cold. She turned away and ran back to the Mazda. The interior lights of the car came on automatically as she threw the door open.

Chick was gone.

55

Chapter 6

It took Russell three hours to die.

It had been the older Mayan’s idea. He was smarter than Creed had given him credit for. He obviously had some grasp of warlock’s potential, even if he had no understanding of the mechanism that made the drug work. ‘They have an interesting ritual in Miss Winterhill’s country,’ he said. ‘It’s called sending someone to Coventry. You know what that means?’

Miss Winterhill was quick. Creed could see she immediately had some idea of what was going to happen. And she wasn’t happy about it.

The Mayans handcuffed Russell and made him sit on the floor in the

corner of the room. The younger brother sat down in an armchair nearby, holding a gun and keeping a casual eye on him. Miss Winterhill glanced nervously at Russell and Creed saw a look of anticipatory pain on her face. 'Yes, I know what that means,' she said.

'What are you talking about?' said the hooker.

'It's something they do at school in England,' said Miss Winterhill 'If you don't like a kid you all agree not to speak to him. You completely ignore him.

Like he doesn't exist.'

'Like freezing him out.'

'Exactly.'

The hooker shot a glance over at Russell, then looked over at the older Mayan who was busy pouring more glasses of cava.

She leaned over close to Miss Winterhill. Creed could see a sheen of sweat on her face. She spoke quietly, as if she didn't want the Mayan to hear. 'All that stuff about dropping off the edge of the world, that's just bullshit, isn't it?'

Miss Winterhill cleared her throat. 'Not necessarily. Every human being depends on millions of tiny subliminal clues from their companions. We are constantly registering whether we are winning other people's attention or not.

We use these signals to guide our behaviour and gauge our own existence. In fact, to reassure us that we exist at all.'

The women both glanced over at Russell in the corner and he stared back.

Their voices had drifted down to a whisper so he couldn't hear them. But you could see he knew they were talking about him.

Miss Winterhill leaned closer to the hooker. 'It seems this drug has an effect 57

on group perception.' She nodded at Russell. 'If we make him the focus of attention and then cut him out of our area of shared reality –'

The two women looked up to see the older Mayan handing them frosted glasses of cava. He poured a glass for Larner and Creed then

clinked them with his own in a toast. He looked at the kid who sat in the corner of the room, motionless on the carpet. The kid's eyes were the flat, frightened eyes of a condemned man.

'Goodbye, Russell,' said the Mayan. Then he swallowed his drink and sat down to watch.

Oddly, Creed had seen something similar before. When he was a teenager he and some college friends used to travel into Buffalo. It was the nearest big city and they came sweeping in from rural roads, intoxicated with the promise of their young lives and the long night ahead. No sleep. Just drinking and loud music and the possibility of girls.

There was a club they went to regularly which had a red neon sign. Real neon, not a hologram. It was a hangout for students from a nearby teaching hospital and they played vintage rhythm and blues live on authentic instruments. No samples. And if you had the nerve you'd cross the dance floor to the side where the girls, mostly nurses and a few trainee paramedics, waited in a tight clique.

They sat at the tables in groups of two or three and if you liked the look of a girl you had to walk up to her table and try and break in on the conversation of her group. There was always this moment when the guy had to start talking to the girl and the girl would have her shield of resistance up, that cool reserve.

Maybe she would make it easy for him. Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she'd freeze him out altogether. Sometimes the girls at the table would size the guy up and decide they weren't going to give an inch.

Creed always wondered if it was some kind of signal the guy gave off, a subliminal display of weakness. But if you took that long walk across the dance floor and they didn't like you, they would be utterly ruthless. You'd find yourself standing beside a table full of girls who wouldn't even acknowledge your existence.

And when that happened you could see it clear across the club. The guy's conversation would falter and his smile would fail and his shoulders would slump. It was like watching the life go out of him. The girls could be completely pitiless, punishing him for not measuring up. It was as if the guy had ceased to exist in their scornful eyes.

And now it was as though the whole room was doing exactly that to

Russell.

It was sickeningly easy to go along with it, to ignore him. You felt ashamed of the guy anyway, disgusted by his weakness. It was the ruthless pack instinct of the playground, cutting out the snivelling weakling, condemning him to his 58

own definition of himself.

But warlock magnified it a thousand times and made it lethal. Russell felt it gathering in the room and he whimpered.

After the first hour the hooker and Miss Winterhill locked themselves in the bathroom. Creed didn't blame them. The Mayans shrugged and sat, holding their guns, watching Russell. They came from the poorest area of rural Mexico and it was a world where death was commonplace. Moving up through the free trade zone as kids they had eventually carved out a lucrative lifestyle in the US. But their careers as drug dealers were no less ruthless than the lives they'd left behind. They never had the chance to soften and they felt not even the slightest sympathy. To them, the manner of Russell's death was just a novelty.

They watched what happened to him and discussed the fact that the girls'

absence from the living room didn't seem to weaken the process at all. It had probably gone too far by that time anyway. The Mayans were fascinated by it all.

Creed and Larner did their best to ignore what was happening. They sat playing cards, slapping them down on the glass block of the coffee table. They drank and smoked and hardly exchanged a word, trying to lose themselves in the game, trying to forget the thing in the corner.

Creed knew that the end was near when he realized he'd forgotten the name. The name of the guy sitting in the corner. Creed knew the guy was still in the same room, only a metre or two away. He knew that if he turned his head he'd see the guy.

But it was a purely abstract, intellectual sort of knowledge. Creed knew it, but he didn't feel it. Deep in his heart, he didn't believe it.

At some primal level he denied the kid's existence. He had let the kid's very name go. What had it been? Curtis? Lewis? Rusty? Sutton? Something like that.

But the name eluded him.

Finally the Mayan brothers had gone over and crouched beside the thing in the corner. One of them had lifted its wrist and checked for a pulse. Then he had got up, gone to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

‘You can come out now. What’s-his-name is dead.’

Chapter 7

Apple orchards and fields of hops flashed by in the Kentish night. The headlights of the VW carved a tunnel out of the shadows as it sped along the dark, winding roads, dense green trees closing in an arch overhead then opening again as the hills descended to fields and the ancient woods relinquished the road.

Ace gripped the steering wheel of the Mazda, dabbing the accelerator with her toe, breathing curses. She was sweating with frustration at not being able to take the lead and roar off down the open road.

But she didn’t know where they were going, so she had to swallow her impatience and hold a steady distance behind Shell and Jack. She pulled over whenever they did, easing into a passing space to let approaching cars roar by on the narrow road, all engine noise and glaring headlights in the country darkness.

She was tensely gripping the wheel of the Mazda, as if she could urge the car ahead more quickly through the effort of her muscles. Her shoulders were beginning to ache when the brake lights of the Volkswagen finally flashed red and the indicator flickered on and off.

She followed Jack and Shell down a narrow farm track that ran off the main road to the right.

High banks topped by hedges and lengths of wire fence ran along either side of her, a dense tunnel of emerald leaves and silver wire gleaming in the VW’s headlights.

An owl’s eyes shone at Ace for an instant before it turned its sharp white face away and took flight from the fence post where it had perched. For a moment the owl floated in the tunnel of light and then it all went dark.

Jack had cut the lights on the Volkswagen. They must be near their destination.

Ace had already turned off her own headlights. Now she slowed the Mazda to a crawl. Her eyes were still adjusting to the sudden darkness and, when the others stopped and pulled over, she missed them at first, only seeing the dark shape of the VW after she'd passed it.

Ace braked, reversed and pulled over beside the other vehicle, easing in beside a tangled mass of holly leaves that whined as they rubbed against the side of the car.

61

Overhead the clouds had broken, exposing a fragment of bright moon that lit up the sky and turned distant ploughed fields into a rippling pale surface studded with black clumps of trees.

An owl called behind her, back near the road and Ace wondered if it was the same bird she'd startled a moment ago. Beside the Volkswagen two figures stood in shadow with a tiny red glow slowly orbiting between them like some strange, slow firefly. Ace smelled dope on the clean night air as Jack took a deep breath and handed the joint back to Shell.

The laboratory complex lay a few hundred yards below them, notched between two hills at the end of a private road. It was nothing like Ace had expected. She'd imagined a modern industrial structure or a group of prefabs like you'd find in a science park, but the moonlight revealed a pair of handsome old farm buildings with two big barnlike structures behind them.

Between these a small pond gleamed in the moonlight. Dimly visible beyond the barns, where the farm land began to rise towards wooded hills, was a fifth building, big and modern-looking.

A small private road ran through a gateway towards the buildings and spread into a long circular drive. Centred inside the driveway was an island of neatly tended shrubs and flower-beds. A short side-road led off the driveway, curving to the left past one of the farmhouses and terminating at the nearer barn. The tarmac of the private road was dead black in the moonlight.

'Want a hit?' The glowing red circle floated out of the darkness towards Ace. Shell was grinning at her, tattooed face unearthly in the moonlight. She held the joint in her extended hand, waving it slowly

in circles so it blurred with persistence of vision into a solid red ring, like a child waving a sparkler on bonfire night. Ace blinked and looked away from the hypnotic motion. ‘No thanks.’ Under the dope smell and the tang of patchouli she could still detect that strange liquorice scent which seemed part of Shell.

‘I’ve dreamed of this moment.’ Shell lazily exhaled smoke. ‘I first saw it in a vision. A warlock vision. Going to the house of Allen Road and finding an ally there.’

‘Of course, we were hoping to get the big guy.’ Jack loomed out of the darkness, grinning. ‘But we had to settle for you.’

‘My ally,’ continued Shell dreamily. ‘Coming here in the night to help storm this place.’

‘Forget about storming it. The best we can hope to achieve is a quick look round. It would be crazy to try anything else with just the three of us.’ But Ace touched the butt of the pistol she’d tucked into her jeans.

‘Hey. Was I in this vision too?’ Jack looked at Shell.

‘You know you were,’ said the tattooed girl, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

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‘What else happened in this vision?’

Shell’s face suddenly lost its smile. ‘A big bird spread its wings and took off from the top of a tall building. The sky was black and it went on forever and the bird flapped its wings and went up there. Up into the dark. It was never coming back.’

Ace repressed a shiver. ‘Come on, let’s get going.’

63

Chapter 8

‘Right, now we can do business,’ said the Mayan. ‘Sorry about the delay, but we couldn’t go ahead until that cop was taken care of.’ He nodded to the corner of the room. Miss Winterhill and the hooker had covered the body with a sheet.

The hooker sat, expressionless, chewing on her gold crucifix. ‘Can I go

now?' she said.

'As soon as we've concluded this transaction,' said the Mayan. His brother came through from the bedroom carrying a Jiffy bag. He handed it over and the Mayan cut it open with a fat-bladed knife. Inside was a sheet of clear plastic bubble wrap with a large white shape nestled at its centre. The Mayan sliced it and a mass of small white pills spilled out on the coffee table. As the plastic was opened Creed caught an intense whiff of the liquorice smell.

'Five hundred and twelve of them,' said the Mayan, picking up one of the pills.

'I can't believe anyone would pay good money to take this stuff,' said Miss Winterhill.

'I can,' said Larner. 'I'll take a hundred tabs. That will be enough to offer a taste to my best customers. What the hell, if she doesn't want any, make it two hundred.'

'Me too,' said Creed. 'Excuse me for a minute.' He got up and went into the bathroom.

His police radio was still hidden where he'd left it in the cistern. He didn't quite know what he would have done if it hadn't been.

'I have sight of the merchandise,' said Creed into the transmitter microphone. 'The stuff is on the table. Get in here quick and bring a medic.'

'Are you all right?' Chavez's worried voice came back.

'I'm fine. But someone else isn't. It's probably too late but I want them to try and get a life-support unit hooked up to him. I don't hold out much hope.

He's a mess. But you never know.'

'What happened?'

'They thought he was me.'

He switched off the radio and put it in his pocket. No point hiding it any more. The shit was about to hit the fan.

Creed flushed the toilet and ran the taps in the sink and went back into the living room.

The important thing now was the disposition of the guns. If this bust went off smoothly there wouldn't be any further loss of life. But it all depended on where the weapons were in the living room now.

Creed walked back down the short corridor from the bathroom. In the living room Larner was counting his tablets, his plastic smuggler's handgun still in the centre of the coffee table. One.

The older Mayan was standing by the small bar alcove opposite the windows, mixing a drink. His gun, a compact snub-barrelled assault weapon, was sitting on the bar among the bottles. Two.

His brother was coming through from the kitchen, jacket off so you could see his shoulder holster. His gun was there, spring-loaded into its quick-draw clip. Three.

The younger Mayan smiled at Creed as he came into the living room. The mood had lightened up considerably now that the deal was finally drawing to a conclusion. Creed sat down on the couch and reached under the cushion.

He felt the rubber grip on his own police Python. Four.

The hooker, sitting on the coffee table near Creed, leaned over to say something to him.

Creed never got to find out what it was.

The younger Mayan had wandered over to the window and was peering out. Down below, in the parking lot, Creed knew there was a van full of police officers moving in for the arrest. But they were all experienced professionals.

Chavez knew there was a risk of being spotted from the window. He should be taking care not to be seen.

But one look at the Mayan's face told Creed it was all over.

'It's a bust,' said the Mayan, pulling his gun out of the shoulder holster.

'They're coming in!'

His brother scooped his own gun off the mirrored surface of the bar,

knocking over a bottle of vodka. ‘Wait!’ he said.

The young Mayan didn’t listen. He was aiming his gun at Creed. ‘We got the wrong guy, didn’t we? It’s him.’

‘No,’ said the brother, but the young Mayan was already dropping into a firing stance.

Creed’s body was in motion long before he consciously decided he was in danger. He reached under the cushion and grabbed his Python as he came off the couch, throwing himself towards the coffee table.

The hooker was sitting directly in front of him and he put his hands out and shoved her so hard she toppled off and landed on the carpet a metre away.

Safely out of the line of fire.

66

Creed kept moving, using the momentum of the shove and rolling over the coffee table. He landed on the floor on the far side with the bulky block of high-impact glass between himself and the Mayan.

The Mayan fired at him but the glass stopped the bullet dead with a sound like a pebble clinking on the surface of a frozen lake.

Larner had jumped out of his armchair. Behind him Miss Winterhill was standing in the kitchen doorway, frozen.

Larner wanted his pistol but it was in the centre of the coffee table, right at the nexus of the gunfire. The Mayan was circling around now, coming out from behind the couch, trying to find an angle where Creed couldn’t use the glass table to shield himself. It would only be a fraction of a second before he had a clean shot, so Creed preempted him.

He bounced up from behind the table, trying to take aim at the Mayan. But even as he stood he felt a cold shock of apprehension. He realized his back was exposed and that he was in trouble. The hooker was screaming something.

Creed twisted his body and threw himself back towards the couch. He caught his kneecap a shockingly painful blow on the edge of the table as he scrambled over it.

Behind him there was the sound of an automatic weapon on rapid fire. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the older Mayan blasting away. At the same time, on the other side of the room, his brother was firing the handgun. They were both firing at the spot where Creed had been standing a moment earlier.

But Creed wasn't there now and the Mayans were making a mistake that even the most basic firearms training would have prevented. You don't shoot at the enemy if there's a chance of hitting each other.

The sub-machine-gun cut off abruptly. The Mayan was staring in horror. His kid brother was on the floor with his chest torn open, blood bubbling out, and he'd done it. Creed aimed his Python at the older Mayan. But before he could squeeze the trigger he saw a small dark spot appear magically in the centre of the man's forehead. Simultaneously he heard the sound of the gunshot. The Mayan toppled and Creed turned to see Larner holding his smuggler's pistol.

The room was suddenly very quiet. The hooker and Miss Winterhill were both staring at the two men who remained alive. Creed aimed his pistol at Larner. 'I don't have to read you your rights, do I?'

Larner stared at him in disgust. 'So it was you after all,' he said. 'I thought they had it wrong. I never guessed you were a cop.'

He was still holding the plastic handgun. It wasn't pointing at Creed but his hand was gradually rising. In a moment it would be aimed at him.

‘Relax,’ said Creed. ‘It’s over. Put it down.’ But Larner was still raising the gun.

67

‘I can’t do the time, man,’ he said. He sounded genuinely regretful. ‘I’ve got a family.’

So Creed shot him, squarely through the chest.

Larner dropped his gun and took two steps back. He looked surprised. He turned and casually reached out towards the window. Then he tripped and stumbled forward. Creed had a ridiculous impulse to try and help the man he’d just shot. Too late.

Larner fell against the plastic sheeting that covered the window and it split open, spilling him out of the skyscraper. He fell through without a sound. ‘Jesus,’ said Miss Winterhill. The hooker whimpered. Creed went to the window.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, looking down, standing among the frantic whipping strands of the torn plastic. Larner’s body was a broken puppet on the pale cement below. Two uniformed police were closing in on it, running, as if eager to claim a prize.

Creed turned back to the living room, suddenly very tired. He put the safety back on his handgun and holstered it. Behind him the front door of the apartment splintered open but he didn’t even bother looking up.

He sat down on the leather sofa again, feeling a thousand years old. It was as if someone had thrown a switch cutting off all his energy. He felt like he might never move again. His knee ached. Creed stared at the table that had saved his life. He could see a deformed tiny mass of dark metal in the glass.

It was the bullet, lodged in the block, at the centre of an intricate system of cracks. It looked like a photograph from a physics text illustrating stress in transparent materials.

The room was filling up with New York City police and other personnel as well – three men and a woman wearing black IDEA uniforms, baseball caps and sunglasses. Creed realized absently that IDEA had probably been the ones the Mayan had seen from the window. There were always problems of communication when more

than one law enforcement agency worked on the same arrest.

Chavez had told him nothing about IDEA involvement, but then Creed doubted if he had known anything about it himself until a moment ago.

Now a female paramedic in green overalls was crouching beside the Mayan brother who was still in the process of dying, trying to rig some life-support on him even though she knew it was useless. The other brother was already being zipped into a bag.

The hooker was standing with her back against the wall, staring at Creed, her eyes so flat and blank with shock that they looked like black buttons. A uniformed cop was pointing an assault rifle at her. The cop looked young enough to be her son.

'It's okay, let her go,' said Creed. 'We don't need her.' The cop lowered his gun and the hooker was instantly in motion, bolting for the door.

The police and the IDEA men parted to let her go and she was out the door, into the hallway and gone from his life forever.

Creed watched her go; he felt something but he wasn't sure quite what.

Relief, perhaps.

Miss Winterhill, the other player in the drug deal, was nowhere in sight.

Creed had lost track of her after the second gunshot. Subconsciously he must have decided she was no threat and dismissed her from his attention. Now he went through into the long narrow galley kitchen and found her there, talking to the senior IDEA officer. They were drinking freshly squeezed orange juice taken from the Mayan's refrigerator and chatting away in a relaxed manner like old friends.

'What's the story?'

They both stared at Creed as if to reprimand him for the rudeness of his interruption. 'That's my prisoner you're talking to,' said Creed, barging past them to the fridge and helping himself to a glass of the juice.

He turned and locked eyes with the IDEA officer. He was tall, a white kid with dreadlocks. Creed didn't get any feedback from him because the guy was wearing sunglasses.

'You're going to hand her over to me,' said Creed. Actually he was by no means sure of the protocol. The place was crawling with IDEA men and it might turn out to be their bust instead of his. But it did no harm to try and get them off balance, assert dominance.

'Forget it,' said a familiar voice from the direction of the living room. Creed turned and saw Eddie Chavez, his sector chief, standing there looking twice as fat as usual and very uncomfortable in standard issue body armour.

'The International Drug Enforcement Agency is now officially in charge of this operation, Creed.' Eddie at least had the good grace to look ashamed.

'So what? She isn't going anywhere until I say so,' said Creed. He wasn't going to let go that easily. 'I want to run a computer check on her. The name is Winterhill.'

'Actually it's Summerfield. Bernice Summerfield,' said the woman.

'Summerfield, Winterhill. Very cute,' said Creed. He took a sip of the orange juice and that was a had mistake. It was like chilled battery acid burning his stomach. He wondered vaguely if there was something he could mix it with.

Maybe that vodka bottle the Mayan had spilled wasn't quite empty. He'd have to go and look.

'You can call me Benny,' said the woman.

'Anything I'm going to call you is likely to be a lot less pleasant.'

'Take it easy, Creed.'

69

The IDEA officer took off his sunglasses, maybe in an attempt to be a human being. He massaged the bridge of his nose and looked wearily at Creed. 'You see, Benny is assisting us on this assignment. She's a special operative on secondment to IDEA and the NYPD. She's one of us.'

‘Oh great,’ said Creed. ‘Was there anyone here who wasn’t an undercover cop?’

‘Hopefully the guys you killed,’ said the IDEA man.

In the hallway outside the apartment the paramedic had given up on the younger Mayan and was concentrating her attention on what was left of what’s-his-name. The kid they’d pushed off the edge of the world. The one whose name no one could remember.

The paramedic had connected the kid’s withered body to the life-support stretcher and she was crouching on the narrow carpeted floor, studying the computer readout with disbelief on her face.

‘No hope?’ asked Creed.

‘He’s long gone,’ said the paramedic. ‘And according to this he died of an acute downward spiral in his body temperature. That’s what it says. “Catas-trophic, rapid and irreversible loss of core temperature.” That’s a lot of help to me.’

Creed looked down at the body. It reminded him of photographs of lost Arctic expeditions, corpses dug out of ice.

‘The computer is suggesting either hypothermia or extreme shock as cause of death.’ The paramedic looked at him as if he might enlighten her.

Creed just shrugged. ‘I guess we froze him out so effectively he froze to death.’

Creed turned to see that the woman, Benny Summerfield, had come out into the hallway. She looked at the kid’s shrunken body. ‘We applied a social shock to him and it killed him. People need people,’ she said, with a bitter smile.

‘But people don’t die when they’re alone,’ said Creed. Now that he was coming down from the drug everything was taking on a nightmarish quality.

All the frantic explanations he’d contrived to defend himself were crumbling.

Now it seemed that warlock was far too powerful and far too dangerous to yield to any easy explanation. ‘People go and spend years in the wilderness and they don’t die like this.’

‘Different contexts,’ said Benny. ‘Different expectations. In the wilderness we’re out of the social web. But as soon as we’re back among other human beings we instantly plug into subliminal communication and depend on it. We want confirmation from others that we exist.’

‘Like getting a radar echo,’ said Creed.

‘Exactly,’ said Benny.

The paramedic was giving them a look of distaste as they stood over the dead body of the kid, calmly conducting a technical discussion. She has a point, thought Creed, but he was too tired to care.

‘Besides, even in the wilderness we often get feedback,’ said Benny. ‘From animals, the way they react to us.’

‘Animals?’ Creed watched as the paramedic switched off the life-support computer.

‘Sure, there’s a vast amount of subliminal communication between humans and animals. A dog always knows if you’re scared of it.’

Creed watched the paramedic go. She was wheeling what’s-his-name’s stretcher away down the corridor to the elevators. It looked as if IDEA had managed to get them working. They always carried a lot of clout.

‘When a human being walks through a forest he is creating a profound reaction in every bird, rabbit or squirrel that senses his presence.’ Benny looked at Creed as if it was important that he understood. ‘We make ripples in our environment. We may not be aware of it, but in the past we would have been keenly alert to these things. Not so long ago. When we were animals ourselves.’

‘How the hell do you know so much?’

The IDEA guy with the dreadlocks came out and joined them in the corridor.

‘I told you, Miss Summerfield is a special agent. She’s an example of the intelligence of our personnel. That’s why they call us IDEA. Because we’re all so smart.’ He smiled at them.

‘If you were smart,’ said Creed, ‘you’d get a different job.’

Chapter 9

Chick was trapped.

And the humiliating thing was that he'd been trapped in a basket. When Chick was a kitten he had gone on journeys in a similar basket with a scrap of blanket in the bottom for him to sleep on. His mother and his brothers and sisters had been carried away to new homes in such a basket. Then, later, he sometimes had to go into the basket and be taken to the place of many animals where he had to stand on a table and the humans had put stinging thorns into him.

Once, when he had been possessed with a fever, he had been transported to the place of many animals and the stinging thorn had been put into him and the fever had receded soon afterwards. As ridiculous as it seemed, after that incident Chick had been haunted by the suspicion that the stinging thorn had something to do with the departure of the fever. How could that be? Humans were so lacking in perception. They were strange automatous unaware creatures who couldn't breathe the pollen on the night air or hear a mouse move in the attic or taste the glorious richness of an enemy's blood. They were so estranged from nature it seemed ridiculous. How could they have the power to heal? Yet in Chick's experience, they did. He grudgingly and gradually came to accept the notion. The humans had deliberately stung him to heal him.

And Chick slowly came to regard the place of many animals as benign.

He came to accept being put in a basket and taken there when he was ill.

Now once again he was in a basket, like some helpless, big-pawed kitten, surrounded by unyielding twigs which prevented him escaping. He rubbed his shoulders against the twigs, pacing this tightly circumscribed world. He howled with impatience. If he had been back home in the garden these twigs would have given way at his probings and let him prowl through the bed of shrubs down to the dry fountain and the big gate which led onto the road where the dangerous creatures roared past.

At night the creatures became less frequent and sometimes Chick slipped out through the gate and explored the street, cautiously watching for the huge shining eyes which signified the approach of one of the road creatures. To get through the gate Chick had to stretch

his lithe slim body and slip between cold hard twigs like the ones which confined him now.

But this set of twigs had been cunningly planted close together so no cat could escape past them. Chick drew his small furred cheeks back, baring his fangs and snarling in frustration. Beyond the hard twigs he could see the open door of the building. Outside moonlight glowed on stones and flower-beds and, best of all, the small pond.

Chick longed to be out in the moonlight strutting and exploring, perhaps joining combat with another tom. The thought of battle made his strong small heart surge and sharpened his perception. He circled in the cold confines of the basket, impatient to be released and to set about his business. He wished he was back in the rich expanse of garden that was his home.

He knew how the moonlight fell on the contours of that garden. He knew its shadows and secret places. The garden was a whole world to him, from the hollow where the foxes emerged by the edge of the woods to the hole in the brick wall, concealed by weeds, where the Siamese cat sometimes came in. Chick took great pleasure in ambushing the Siamese, so much so that he occasionally let the cat pass unmolested. He didn't want to scare him so much that the game would come to an end.

Chick tried to slip through the twigs again but it was no good. The twigs in the gate at home were made of the same strange wood, cold and smooth and unscratchable. But that was where the resemblance ended. The twigs in the gate were larger and grew further apart they were easy to slip between. They were more easily deceived than these sly, closely planted twigs.

Chick sighed with regret and curled up in the corner of the strange basket.

He wished he'd stayed at home. He could be patrolling the vast moonlit lawns right now, a miniature jungle in which he was the tiger. But instead he had elected to accompany Ace.

Chick liked Ace. She smelled of danger and excitement. When he'd seen her climb into the road beast he'd felt his pulse quicken with the promise of adventure. So tonight he'd waited for the beast's side to open up and he'd jumped in too. He was accustomed to riding inside the road beasts, so much so that he no longer needed to travel in a

basket when he went to the place of many animals to receive the beneficial prick of the thorns.

That was why he'd howled such a scandalized protest when the man with the yellow hair had opened the road beast and taken him.

Now he wished the yellow-haired man would let him out so he could stalk the frogs and admire the moonlight shimmer on the pond. He wanted to stretch his muscles and hunt and celebrate the night. He hoped the man would let him out of his basket soon and leave the stupid dog trapped in hers.

Chick was no longer a kitten. He had no need of baskets, especially now the journey in the road beast was over.

If the man freed him he wouldn't stray far. By the smells and sounds from 74

the buildings nearby he understood that he had once again been brought to a place of many animals. So why should he flee? He knew that if there were any sharp thorn jabbings they would only be for his own good.

He knew that no one meant him any harm.

Ace made Shell and Jack follow a few paces behind her as they went downhill towards the lab complex. After the first minute she'd almost ordered them to go back to the Volkswagen and wait. They'd been stumbling and clutching each other, chuckling like a couple of kids raiding an apple orchard. But all it took was one glance from Ace and Jack had got the message. Now they were moving slowly and carefully, almost as quiet as Ace herself.

She made them lie down as they approached the perimeter of the lab complex. In the moonlight Ace had seen something she'd missed from the hilltop.

The front approach to the buildings was blocked by a low stone wall that ran between the hedgerows. But the wall appeared purely ornamental. It was low enough to step over and not even topped with broken glass. Centred in the wall was a swinging wooden gate like a farm sty, swung back to permit road traffic. It didn't look like it had been shut in months and its hinges might even have been rusted open. In fact the whole place looked wide open.

Now Ace lay on the damp grass in a depression seven metres from the

gate.

From behind her and to her left Shell whispered, ‘Now?’

‘Give it another minute,’ she whispered back and Shell obediently fell silent.

Ace was trying to think like the lab people. Possibly they were genuinely casual about security, in which case she could just walk in. Alternatively they might want the place to look friendly and inviting, which made sense from a public relations point of view. The happy farm image made it hard to believe that any kind of scientific research was going on there, let alone brutal animal experimentation.

But if it was just a façade there might be some solid security behind it. If Ace was guarding this place she would use motion sensors, set at regular intervals along the top of the wall and in the hedges.

Now she carefully studied the hedgeline and stone wall from where she lay.

She needed to test for those alarms.

In the grass all around her there were small stones of a useful size and heft.

Of course, a stone wouldn’t set off the alarms. An object that small might be a passing bird and you didn’t want your alarms going off every time a bird visited your garden. No, the security hardware would be smart enough to stay quiet unless it saw something of a decent size go over the wall.

So Ace had taken off her jacket, emptied her pockets and filled them with stones. Then she’d swung the weighted cloth like a bolas, whistling through the night air in a swift circle. As Ace spun around, swinging the jacket, she’d 75

begun to feel dizzy, intoxicated almost. It was good to be back in action. With excitement adding to her giddiness, she’d finally let go and tossed the package over the wall and thrown herself onto the ground to wait.

Now Jack and Shell lay behind her, waiting for a response. Ace gave it another 30 seconds to be on the safe side then turned back to look at them.

‘Okay. It looks clear. Let’s go.’

Ace didn’t whisper; she spoke quietly but in a normal tone. She knew that the urgent sibilance of a whisper could travel further than normal speech.

Shell and Jack waited just inside the gate as she bent down to pick up her jacket from under a hedge and then they started their search.

The place was like the world’s tidiest farm. And the most silent. Any normal farmyard would have disgorged a pack of dogs that raced barking and snapping at their heels by now. In this place there was just silence and stillness.

There were lights on in only two of the buildings, the old farmhouses, and Ace decided to check these out before doing anything else.

Their line of approach had led them towards the left-hand spur on the private road. Now they followed this to one of the buildings. The first window she came to was tilted open slightly to catch the cool air of the country night.

Ace knelt below it and was horrified to find Jack and Shell pressing close behind her. She gestured for them to move away and followed them until they were back on the lawn on the far side of the road. Then she crawled back below the window.

She breathed in and out for a few moments to gather and calm herself. If she was relaxed she knew she was less likely to attract attention. When her heartbeat had slowed sufficiently she eased her face slowly up to the window and risked a quick look. Inside she could see a small sitting-room. A young man and a woman were playing a board-game. It looked like backgammon but Ace couldn’t be sure. They sat at either end of a long white sofa, facing each other. The board and some money was spread out on the sofa cushions between them.

The rest of the building only took a moment to check out. The next lighted window showed her steamy glass and the big white shapes of a bathtub and sink. Someone was standing at the sink, brushing their teeth. All Ace could see through the misted glass was the vague pink shape of the person’s back, shoulder bobbing with the toothbrush motion. For no discernible reason, Ace was convinced it was a woman.

The other two windows had curtains glowing in them and Ace was fairly certain both were bedrooms. She returned to the footpath and gestured to Jack and Shell to follow her. She was less worried by their

presence now; in fact, they weren't working out too badly. They hadn't said a word since they'd entered the farmyard and now they were keeping a sensible distance behind 76

her, moving low and staying quiet. Ace had been in tight situations with less competent companions.

She heard the owl call again, from the trees on the hill above. It was a reassuring sound. Ace stopped and stood for a moment, sizing up the second farmhouse. It was set at the rear of the farm, just opposite the first barn. It looked like this was the original farmhouse, with some of its weathered old stone kept picturesquely intact around the doors and windows. One of these windows looked into some kind of large office or conference room. Next to it was evidently someone's living quarters: a room with a bed and fitted cupboards. The cupboard doors were open and Ace could see men's shoes and a wide assortment of shirts inside. She immediately ducked back as a man came into the room. Kneeling underneath the window, she heard the man humming happily and the sound of wire hangers scraping on the cupboard rail as he moved his shirts around.

Ace risked another quick look and saw a bespectacled middle-aged man perched on the bed in pyjamas, inspecting a pile of sweaters. He was looking through the brightly coloured clothes, unfolding them, studying them, then folding them again, piled in a new combination. It reminded Ace of a child with his toys. The man paused in his study of his clothing and glanced towards the window. Ace dropped out of sight, her heart pounding in her ears. She was moving carefully away from the window, around the corner, when she felt someone tug at her shoulder.

Ace spun around to see Shell standing over her. The girl's eyes were black and gleaming and inhuman in the moonlight. They could have been part of the tattooed pattern of her face. She turned away from Ace and beckoned urgently for her to follow. The two women passed the first farm building, skirted a small pond set in a fan of cobblestones and joined Jack standing in the doorway of one of the barns. There was a small, familiar yowling from just inside the door and Ace had to stop herself exclaiming out loud. It was Chick.

Ace trotted past Jack, right into the barn. She saw the five small portable cages sitting on the concrete floor. Three of them contained animals she didn't recognize, a dog and two cats. In the others she saw the black dog Sheba and her cat Chick.

Chick made another small cry as he recognized Ace and Sheba whined as she bent down to kneel on the cold stone floor. The other animals remained oddly silent. One of the cats was fat and white, long-haired. The other was slender and black. The dog looked like a young mongrel to Ace.

She was reaching for the lock on the small barred door when she saw a movement in the shadows beyond the cages. The building was suddenly flooded with the brilliant white light of fluorescent ceiling lamps.

77

Ace's irises constricted painfully in the sudden harsh glare. Through squinting, tearful eyes she saw the tall man with the blond hair leaning against the far wall of the barn. He was standing with one hand on a wall mounted panel of switches, smiling at her.

She had the gun out of her waistband almost immediately, but just as quickly she felt hands closing on her arm. Jack had grabbed her and now he was clumsily trying to wrench the pistol out of her fingers. Ace moved her left hand away from her body to get some momentum, making a knuckle fist, taking aim at the centre of Jack's bearded throat.

His grip on her arm slackened almost immediately. 'Hey. Hold it. Peace.'

'It's all right,' said the blond man. 'Don't hurt him.'

'Yeah, don't hurt me.' said Jack. Shell was looking from him to the blond in a state of shock.

'Jack, what's he doing here?' she said.

The blond man came closer, smiling. 'Jack and I arranged all this.'

'Arranged all what?'

'Listen, Shell. Everything's cool. It's like I told you. I met Sean in the pub and got talking. But I didn't tell you everything. I got him to agree to help us.'

'You're going to help us?' Ace was still holding the gun but she was uncertain where to aim it. Jack had stepped away from her and the other man was making no threatening moves.

‘That’s right. Here, just let me close the door.’ The man called Sean stepped carefully past Ace and gripped the handle on the barn door, a collapsing set of vertical metal shutters riding on castors in a long groove in the concrete floor.

‘I don’t want anyone at the farmhouse to know that we’re here.’

Ace wasn’t sure if he was up to something, so she tracked him with the gun as he drew the door silently shut. He smiled at her as he stepped away from the door. ‘Make sure that thing doesn’t go off, okay?’

Shell was kneeling by Sheba’s cage, trying to open the door to check that the dog was all right. Jack was bending over her, trying to help her with the lock. ‘Leave me alone,’ she hissed. ‘I’ve got it.’ She opened the door and the black dog licked at her clenched fist. When she was sure the bitch was all right Shell gently shut the door again and Jack clumsily helped her lock it.

The bearded man was wincing as she scolded him, jabbing a finger at his face.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me you’d planned all this? I’m nervous enough. This is the first lab I’ve ever done.’

‘Listen, don’t be too hard on him,’ said Sean. ‘It was mostly my idea. As soon as Jack told me about you people and how you felt, I jumped at the chance to help. I’m sick of this place. When I started working here, I didn’t think it would bother me.’ He frowned, his brow furrowing thoughtfully. Despite 78

everything, Ace thought it made him look nice. ‘But I couldn’t just shrug it off.

It’s not that easy. It started to get to me.’

‘What did?’

‘The animals. The stuff they do to them.’

‘See, Shell? He’s on our side.’

‘Why did he take Sheba? And the cat?’

‘We worked it all out. I phoned him from the pub when we got there. He had to take the cat so Ace would come here with us. He took

Sheba as well because it would have looked suspicious otherwise.'

'Looked suspicious? It is bloody suspicious! Why didn't you just tell us what was going on?' Ace was shaking with after effects of the struggle, adrenalin still blazing in her system. She'd pumped herself up ready for a gunfight.

'I wanted you to come with us. The only way we could make sure of that was by taking Chick.' Jack kneeled by the smaller cage and inserted a finger between the bars, waggling it at the cat. Chick approached and sniffed it disdainfully. 'See? He's fine.'

The blond man knelt down beside Jack and unlocked Chick's cage. He swung the door open and the small ginger cat uncurled and eased himself out, pausing for a moment to look at Ace before darting across the concrete floor. He began to prowl the corners of the barn on a feline reconnaissance mission.

Sean smiled. 'You can take him back to your car now if you like. But I suggest we leave him shut up here. He'll be safe while I show you around.'

He smiled at Ace. 'Hang on to your gun if you like.'

'I just don't like surprises,' said Ace, slipping the fire control on the pistol back to the safety position. She tucked it back in the waist of her jeans. But she made sure it was still in easy reach.

Shell was scowling like a spoiled child. 'I don't like surprises either.'

Jack settled a tentative hand over her shoulder, as though she might be too hot to touch. 'I know, love. But think how much more damage we can do with this guy on our side.'

'If it's damage you're after, I'm your man.' Sean had scooped Chick up off the floor. He opened the cage again, holding the small cat in a relaxed embrace.

Ace found herself thinking that he'd look quite good holding a baby. 'We'll show these bastards.' Sean urged the little ginger cat back into the cage and locked it. 'Free every animal in the place and tear it apart.' There was silence in the concrete building for a moment. 'The place, I mean,' he said quickly.

'Tear the place apart.'

‘Right on,’ said Jack. ‘Power to the people. I mean, to the animals.’ He grinned at Shell who was trying hard to remain scowling. But Ace saw her beginning to flash a smile. The girl had a nice smile.

79

The blond straightened up and went back to the door of the barn. ‘Now everybody be dead quiet,’ he said. ‘I’m going to open up.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Ace. ‘Shouldn’t you turn off the –’

But Sean had already slammed the doors open with a single heave. The brilliant lights of the barn shone out of the doorway, gleaming on the surface of the pond and on the muzzles of the guns that were pointed in at them.

Three guns. They were being aimed by two women and a man. Ace recognized the couple who had been playing backgammon on the sofa. There was another woman with them, presumably the one she’d seen brushing her teeth.

The guns were snub-nosed automatic weapons with a two-handed grip. They looked like Heckler & Koches.

Ace’s hand was halfway to her own gun when she heard Sean say, ‘The black-haired girl’s armed. Shoot her if necessary.’

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Chapter 10

Artie kept glancing back over his shoulder and asking her if she was okay.

Benny kept nodding yes, but the truth was she felt cold and light-headed with exhaustion after the bust. She didn’t know if it was the sustained tension or the after-effect of the white pill. Warlock.

She felt as if she was coming down with the flu. The lights streaming past the smoked bulletproof windows revealed city streets that looked distant and unreal. A stage set, constructed just for her eyes, which was populated by uneasy-looking actors and which was being dismantled, section by section, as soon as she passed through it.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Artie, looking back over his shoulder again and grinning at her. For some reason he had taken a protective, almost

parental interest in Benny, the new member of the team. Webster and the Bowmans she hadn't worked out yet, but Artie seemed to want to take her under his wing. It might have been embarrassing if it hadn't been so funny. She towered over the small man and was probably a few years older than him.

Benny smiled back at Artie. The truth was, she thought he was rather sweet.

'We're going to be home soon,' he said. 'Then you can relax and take it easy.'

'I wouldn't call it home,' said Webster, attaching an antistatic earthing bracelet to his wrist and sealing it with Velcro.

'I'd call it the haunted

skyscraper.' He bent back over his circuit board. 'And anyhow, we're going to have to be debriefed by the Cowboy Monster before anyone can relax and take it easy.'

The place that Webster referred to as the haunted skyscraper was officially called the King Building. Or at least, that was the name on the slab of black marble above the main entrance.

The van entered the building's parking lot and swept past the smeared graffiti and plywood shutters of the ground level. While they parked Benny glanced out at the brightly coloured swirls of graffiti then looked upwards, at the towering black glass of the structure receding into the evening sky.

The King Building had been one of the great seats of corporate power. It had once housed the offices of the Butler Institute.

Benny climbed out of the van and strolled across the wide, empty car park.

She felt unsteady, as if she had just completed a long voyage on a boat and finally come ashore. She looked down at her feet. On either side weeds grew 81

tall and green through cracks in the concrete.

The Bowmans had climbed out already and gone round to the passenger door of the van, their matching black pony-tails swinging from the backs of their baseball caps.

They took the weapons from the cab of the van and turned towards the King Building, without glancing back.

Benny never felt entirely comfortable in the company of the Bowmans and now she hung back, not wishing to travel up in an elevator alone with the couple.

Webster was unpacking his electronics and Artie was taking out the picnic box full of confiscated drugs. Benny waited for them, staring up at the skyscraper, intermittently illuminated by a setting sun that glowed a deep orange-red behind a dark flow of storm clouds.

Broken windows pockmarked the smooth glass flanks of the building. Inside, the story was much worse. Whole floors had been gutted by fire or rotted by flood. Webster insisted the place had been the scene of a small war and after Benny had seen the bullet holes that laced the walls, she was inclined to believe him.

Mind you, Webster also claimed the whole place was haunted, particularly the old maintenance computer which had once run the building, and in his spare time he attempted to reactivate the dormant software. He described his hobby as trying to make contact with the spirit world.

At least it kept him out of trouble.

The man Webster called the Cowboy Monster was waiting for them in an empty office on one of the floors which had been converted to IDEA use.

Benny felt that his nickname was a bit unfair. It was true that he wore one of those thin black ties that you associated with westerns or oil millionaires, and a ring with a crude skull on it carved from a block of Mexican silver. But he also had a courtly, gentle manner and his heavy Texan accent was leavened with the vocabulary of a polite, scholarly man.

As Benny came into the room he lurched forward, lifting his bulk out of the oversized leather swivel-chair behind the oak desk. He beamed at her. ‘Welcome back, dear. You’ve returned from the hunt, blooded and triumphant.’

He took her hand, clasping it in his huge fists. The crude silver skull on his ring grinned blindly up at Benny.

‘She wouldn’t have been triumphant if we hadn’t arrived to bail her

out,'

said Christine Bowman, taking off her baseball cap and loosening the elastic band that held her pony-tail.

She drew her fingers through her long black hair, combing it out. She spoke in a low, emotionless voice, so that the statement was halfway between a confidential comment and a public challenge in the quiet room.

82

The old man laced his fingers over the hard jut of his belly. 'As I understand it, Chrissie,' he said, 'that boy from the NYPD had the situation well in hand.

By the time you crashed through the door it was all over.' His voice was gentle but when he looked up at the Bowman woman his eyes had gone hard and cold. 'In fact, if I didn't know better I would say all that shooting could have been avoided.'

The woman wouldn't meet his gaze. Her husband put a protective arm around her shoulders.

'Like you said, Mr Harrigan, it was that local cop who started the shooting.

He's called McIlveen. Creed McIlveen.'

The old Texan cleared his throat, a thick wet sound. 'He only started shooting because one of those Mayan boys looked out the window and saw some activity he didn't like. Some police activity.' He scratched the wattled flesh of his neck with a big stubby finger as he studied the Bowmans, his big head tilted at an angle. It was as if he was listening for something.

'It must have been those NYPD clowns,' said Raymond Bowman. His voice was defiant but, like his wife, he wouldn't look the old man in the eye.

'Must have been,' drawled the Texan, and Benny saw that both of the Bowmans were blushing, their pale faces burning bright red, like some kind of synchronized novelty dolls.

The old Texan turned away from them in disgust. He gestured for Benny to sit down, guiding her into the armchair with one pale, liver-

spotted hand on her shoulder. His skin, touching Benny, felt warm and papery and thin. ‘You did well, missy, very well indeed.’

He smiled at her, his warm wet brown eyes lost in an intricate map of wrinkles. Here and there his old worn face had an unnaturally smooth, pale patch where skin cancer had been excised.

He patted Benny on the shoulder and returned to his own chair. ‘All of you have done well,’ he said. ‘You are a credit to the International Drug Enforcement Agency.’ He crossed his legs and for the first time she saw that he wore cowboy boots, made of real leather.

‘Don’t fall for that easygoing shit-kicking manner,’ Webster had told Benny on her first day. ‘He’s actually an immortal monster. A vampire maybe.’

‘That’s horrible.

You’re just saying that because he’s old and ravaged-looking. He can’t help being old. Poor bloke.’

‘Bloke?’ Webster grinned. ‘You’re wrong. He’s as old as the hills and he eats babies to stay alive. You can see it in his eyes.’

‘What better man to run IDEA?’ Raymond Bowman had remarked, running a thin oiled brush through the dismantled ammunition chamber of one of the automatic weapons.

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The Cowboy Monster’s real name was Henry Harrigan Junior.

Benny

thought that she’d heard the name somewhere but decided that it was just the alliteration that made it sound familiar, inevitable almost.

Now the old Texan turned to his desk where Artie had placed the big thermal picnic box. He reached inside and lifted out the plastic evidence bag containing the white pills. He held the bag up in his big, meaty fist, turning it this way and that under the fluorescent ceiling lights. Then he turned to Benny. His smile was huge.

‘You’ve done real well, dear,’ said Harrigan. ‘Go and put your feet up.’

Benny had done a reconnaissance in daylight and she knew where she was heading.

In a side corridor, flanked by empty laboratories and offices, there was a small maintenance cubicle with walls of raw cement. Long loops of coaxial cable and fibre optics hung down from broken foam panels in the ceiling, secured on the wall with dirty strips of silver gaffer tape. At the rear of the cubicle the cable terminated in the back of a dusty video screen ripped from a public call box. The screen sat on top of a stack of cardboard cartons, linked to a keyboard cannibalized from a vintage computer.

All Benny needed now was a chair. She rolled one in from an adjacent office, its wheeled feet leaving dark streaks in the dusty carpet.

She sat down in front of the screen, set the keyboard in her lap, and punched in the international dialling code for England.

The Doctor came into the sitting room and bent over the TV. He took an antique M56 Telefunken microphone and a tangle of cables and adaptors out of his pocket.

'The communication screen in the garage went down,' he said. He was alone in the room and appeared to be talking to himself. 'Right in the middle of your call.'

The Doctor turned the TV on. After a moment the dark screen flashed into colour and an image coalesced. Benny stared out from the TV, her mouth opening and closing silently.

'So I had to patch you through to here,' continued the Doctor. He fitted a series of cables to the microphone, linking them with the small metal adapters.

The final adapter he plugged into the back of the TV. 'Hello, Benny,' he said, speaking into the Telefunken. On the screen Benny's face lit up with a smile.

He turned the sound up on the television. 'Did you manage to get samples of the white pill?' the Doctor asked.

'No,' replied Benny. 'They're all in the IDEA research lab, under lock and key.'

'Do you think you can get access to them?'

'It could be tricky. The security here is very tight.'

‘Don’t take any unnecessary risks,’ said the Doctor. ‘If they’re going to analyse the tablets in their own laboratory you could just get me a copy of the test results.’

‘“Just”, he says. Oh, and by the way, they’re calling this drug “warlock”.’

‘How appropriate,’ said the Doctor.

Chapter 11

Ace wondered what sort of man had so many clothes that he had to keep them in his office as well as in his bedroom.

She had never seen so many suits in her life. The interior of the wardrobe was mirrored, doubling the apparent number, but even allowing for that there were more men’s clothes here than you saw in a lot of boutiques.

Ace watched as the man selected a tastefully patterned silk tie from a neatly folded pile on a shelf and shut the door of the wardrobe. The doors were wooden panels set flush with the wall and as they closed the lights inside the wardrobe winked out.

‘Forgive me,’ said the man as he knotted the tie under the collar of his clean white shirt. ‘I’ll just be a moment more.’ He adjusted the tie by feel then took his jacket off the back of the chair where he’d carefully draped it a moment earlier. Ace didn’t go a bundle on fashion but she recognized the cut of the jacket as being something expensive and Italian. ‘That’s better,’ he said, slipping the jacket on. ‘It’s one of my peculiarities that I feel I must dress for a meeting, even if it’s at –’ he consulted his wristwatch ‘– one in the morning.’

He sat down, facing them across the circular table Ace had glimpsed through the farmhouse window. She was seated beside Shell and Jack in a small arc. ‘Now. My name is Dieter. I’m manager here at the laboratories.

Maxine is going to get us some light refreshments. Please feel free to ask for tea or coffee. We may even have some biscuits. Have a look, would you please, Maxine?’

Dieter smiled politely, waiting. Behind him sat the couple Ace had seen playing backgammon. Sean, the blond animal rights enthusiast,

was standing beside them. The other woman, the one called Maxine, was waiting for Ace to say something.

'Coffee,' said Ace, 'milk and two sugars.' She wanted the caffeine and glucose in her bloodstream. There might be an opportunity to make an escape at any time.

Maxine asked Shell and Jack what they wanted. Jack wouldn't meet her eyes. He had been completely freaked out since the guns had been pointed at him. If there was a chance to make a break for it, Ace was by no means certain he would be any help. 'I'll have tea, please,' he said, his voice barely audible. Shell was in no better shape. She sat with her head down, sobbing 87

over the bright polished wood of the table. Jack looked up apologetically at Maxine. 'She'll have tea as well, please,' he said, a little louder now. Ace kept watching him. Maybe he was getting his nerve back. She hoped so. It would take all three of them working together to get out of this situation.

If they didn't get out, she knew they were in serious trouble. Dieter and his friends struck Ace as people who meant business. Ace hadn't had a proper opportunity to look at him earlier, when she'd seen him sitting on his bed playing with his sweaters.

Dieter was a slender man with spectacles and a high forehead receding to a tangle of chestnut curls. She guessed he was in his late forties but he was very youthful looking: dishevelled but handsome, his eyes gleaming with energy and intelligence.

Ace wondered if he was on something. She realized that he was looking at her with those bright, piercing eyes.

'Let me explain briefly about ourselves and our role here.'

Ace was surprised to hear Jack replying. 'I think we've worked that out,' he said dryly.

Ace felt a stirring of hope. If Jack could pull himself together Shell might be able to lean on him. Ace wanted them both back in a useful state. Their lives might depend on it.

'Perhaps, perhaps not,' said Dieter. 'We are an independent research unit funded by a rotating group of pharmaceutical concerns. Our job is testing drugs before they reach the consumer market-place. It's painstaking research that can take years. We do important work and

we need to experiment on animals. Sorry, did you have something to say, young lady?'

It took Ace a second to realize that he was speaking to Shell. The tattooed girl was trembling visibly as she tried to force the words out.

'I think,' she said, 'I think that I understand now.'

'Good. But what do you understand?' said Dieter.

'Your point of view,' said Shell. Jack was staring at her in astonishment.

'In regard to what?'

'Experimenting with animals. I can see that you genuinely believe that it's right.'

Jack couldn't keep quiet when he heard this. 'For God's sake, shut up, Shell.'

But the tattooed girl ignored him and hurried on. 'I can see that I was wrong.

It is sometimes necessary to do experiments on animals.'

'Shell, this isn't you talking. You're just scared.'

'No, please, let her complete the thought,' said Dieter. He smiled at Shell.

'You now feel that you've seen the error of your ways.'

Shell nodded eagerly. 'Yes.'

'For Christ's sake, Shell. Have a little dignity. He isn't going to let you go.

He's just playing with you.'

'On the contrary, I am willing to believe this is a genuine shift in ideology.

Such things happen under pressure.' Dieter suddenly got up and went to the door. He held it open as the woman came in carrying a tray of

coffees and teas and a plate of Danish pastries. ‘Thank you, Maxine.’ He sat down at the table again with a cup of coffee. ‘Look at these marvellous almond-studded pastries. Maxine is a wonder. An angel. Anyway, I most certainly agree with what Shell was saying. Experiments on animals are absolutely necessary. As, sometimes, are experiments on human beings.’

‘Oh God,’ said Jack.

‘Of course, there is a certain amount we can accomplish with paid volunteers. But this has its limits. We need other subjects as well. Now, you are asking yourselves, where might we find such subjects?’

‘I’m way ahead of you,’ said Jack.

‘If you were to remain quiet, please, you might actually find this quite interesting.’ Dieter nodded at the blond man. ‘You see, we can’t just have Sean going around culling people with his van the way he culls dogs or cats. Of course, a dog or a cat may be intensely missed by its owners. But there is not going to be a police search, even for the most beloved household pet. In contrast, people who vanish generally create problems.’

Dieter picked up his coffee and blew on it before sipping it. ‘So what we need are people who won’t be so acutely missed. The perfect profile for one of our test subjects would be a person who’d dropped out of regular society, into the counter-culture. How do we find such people? Well, we don’t really need to find them. They find us. Animal rights activists. Eco-terrorists. Tribe members.’ Dieter’s face shone with boyish enthusiasm. ‘The wonderful thing is that a certain small number of such people are always guaranteed to come to us. They come to raid the labs. To set the animals free. But they end up staying and helping us with our experiments.

‘Which is where Sean has proved so useful. Making contacts in the pubs and pretending he wants to help break into the labs and so on. Thus every few months we can expect a certain cull.’ He took a sip of his coffee. ‘That’s you guys.’

Shell was sobbing again and Jack looked pale and sick.

‘Your profile is perfect in another way, also,’ said Dieter. ‘You may have read about the tests that the US military and intelligence services conducted with psychedelic drugs after the world war.’ No one replied to Dieter but his eyes were shining happily, caught up in the energy of his own argument. ‘They involved giving brush-cut volunteers LSD

and so on. They were conducted in clinical conditions in big institutional places that make the most impersonal 89

hospital seem friendly by comparison. Of course, the corn-fed cadets dropped acid and found themselves in a mental world that even nineteen years growing up in Iowa couldn't possibly prepare them for. The drug transported them into mental terrain where they couldn't cope. They were terrified. What did they know of altered states of consciousness? A few too many beers on Saturday night in some windy small-town nowhere. They were not equipped to deal with the hallucinatory shimmer of psychedelic drugs. When dark gods rose from stormy seas dripping with jewels, no amount of high school algebra could help them out. They had bad trips. Of course they did. They were the wrong sort of volunteers. But you – you people are perfect.'

Jack suddenly spoke up. He bobbed his head, nodding at Ace. 'Look, she only joined us at the last minute. She isn't a member of the cause. And I think she'll be missed by the people she left behind. You really ought to let her go.'

Dieter just shook his head. 'Sorry. We have our research needs.' He helped himself to another one of the almond pastries. 'But this is one piece of scientific research you ought to approve of. Because we aren't going to use animals for it.'

'People are animals, too,' said Jack.

'Well, in any case, perhaps you remember those blood samples we took from you? They have now been tested. And the results indicate that two of you are heavy users of illegal drugs. Whereas your result is remarkably clean.' Dieter nodded at Ace like an approving teacher. 'You are perhaps drinking somewhat to excess, however, and you should watch those fatty foods. Congratulations nonetheless on a very healthy lifestyle. Which is more than I can say for your friends here.' He indicated Jack and Shell. 'These two have been imbibing listed drugs for most of their adult lives.'

'That's pretty judgemental coming from someone who sells drugs for a living.'

'Well, of course, there are two obvious objections to that absurd assertion.

Firstly I am a research scientist. I conduct tests for pharmaceutical companies, yes, but I'm not directly involved with the selling of their

products.'

'Sounds pretty tenuous to me, Dieter. You work for the drugs companies.

They sell drugs. You're one of them.'

'And secondly,' said Dieter, ignoring Jack, 'secondly, the drugs manufactured by my employers are legal. There is no question of my being involved in any form of criminal enterprise.'

'Except maybe for kidnapping and murder.'

'No one intends to murder you.'

'What were those guns for, then? What would you have done if we ran?'

'As to kidnapping, you trespassed on our property with the intention of causing extensive damage. Instead of prosecuting you, we have been kind 90

enough to forget about the matter. Providing you volunteer to do a drugs trial for us.'

'Who's volunteering?'

'Would you rather we turned you over to the police and pressed charges?'

'Are you offering us that option?'

Dieter gestured impatiently, waving his hands in the air as though Jack's arguments were smoke. 'One thing you are right about, however,' he said.

'There is increasingly a blurred distinction between the legal and illegal drug markets. What makes one chemical against the law while another is perfectly acceptable? Of course, the two categories actually overlap; boundaries are fluid. Cocaine was a perfectly legal and highly popular drug until 1914. It formed the basis for any number of popular refreshments. Coca-Cola is a famous example. Similarly, LSD was initially legal, and found considerable use in the psychiatric community before it was banned.'

'Is there a point to this speech? Or are you just trying to put us to sleep without the aid of drugs?'

‘Really, Jack. There is no need to be rude. I am merely trying to explain to you.’ Dieter looked hurt. ‘When a new drug is created in the laboratory, no one can be certain whether it will end up as a therapeutic tool used by doctors or as a piece of contraband bought and sold by criminals. You have Prozac on one hand and ecstasy on the other. Both mediate serotonin levels in the brain. Both started out respectably enough. Ecstasy, or MDMA: 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, as it is properly called, was patented in 1914 by Merck as an appetite suppressant. They thought it could help respectable dowagers slim their girths. Instead it ended up as a criminal drug.

While in contrast Prozac was allowed to enjoy a prolonged legal vogue. What is the difference? Both alter mood via the same mechanism. But society accepted one and outlawed the other.

‘Of course, this is all equally true for drugs found in nature rather than synthesized in the laboratory. After a new discovery there is always a period of uncertainty as to whether it will be criminalized or permitted.’ Dieter took a small plastic bag out of his pocket. Inside was the small gnarled shape of a dried mushroom. ‘This, for example.’

The liquorice smell suddenly seemed to fill the room.

‘Where did you get that?’ said Jack.

‘Oh, we found it in your vehicle.’ He held the bag up to the light and examined the dried fungus.

Ace recognized it as the mushroom Jack had offered to her by the gate on Allen Road. How long ago had that happened? A few hours. It seemed like years. Ace sniffed; the now familiar pungency was remarkably intense.

‘This is a case in point,’ said Dieter. ‘I’m sure you are familiar with this drug, both in its natural and synthetic forms. It is known by a variety of names, most commonly “warlock”. No one knows how long it has been in use but it has only become widely available in recent years. It is currently illegal but that may change. If it does, my employers are eager to have sufficient data about warlock and its effects. It could be a successful consumer drug on the legal market. This is the project I mentioned.’

‘Are you saying you’re going to give us warlock?’ Shell was staring at

Dieter.

‘Exactly. As I said, you are the perfect people. You are experienced with mind drugs. Giving warlock to you will be like using experienced explorers to go into a dangerous place. Instead of using hopelessly inexperienced am-ateurs, like those farm boys they gave LSD to in the 1950s. They were the wrong candidates. You are perfect. My research associates will gain knowledge of the drug from you and you will be allowed to experience for free a pleasure you normally have to pay for.’

‘And pay quite a lot, too,’ said Jack.

‘We will do our best to make you comfortable and give you a fairly pleasant environment to take the drug in.’

‘Don’t overdo it, Dieter,’ said Maxine. She looked at Ace and the other two.

‘We’ll actually be doing the experiment in a store room.’

‘In a large, airy barn,’ said Dieter. ‘It is pleasant and well lit and clean. We can even provide music for you if you like.’

‘If Tommy ever gets around to sorting out the connections,’ said the other woman.

Dieter shrugged, turning back to Jack. ‘So, you see, your sojourn here may not be as terrible as you imagined. Indeed, we can offer you an experience far superior to what you’re accustomed to. I doubt if you could afford to buy this drug in the purity we have on offer. We have a concentrated form of warlock which is probably several hundred times as strong as what you’re used to.’

‘Several hundred times?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jesus Christ. Several hundred times as strong as what we’re used to?’

‘We are very intrigued to find out what effect it has on test subjects.’

‘Christ,’ repeated Jack. ‘That will fry our brains.’

‘Come now, Jack.’ Dieter smiled, shifting from foot to foot in his fashionably baggy suit. He was full of nervous energy, eager to get started. ‘It doesn’t do to begin an adventure with a negative attitude.’

Chapter 12

Creed was coming home. Bert knew that even before he heard the familiar sound of the car.

It came thundering into the garage under the apartment, followed by a sudden silence which gave way to the ticking of cooling engine, slam of car door, scraping of the small back gate, creak of footsteps on the old wooden staircase that ran up the side of the building.

It was none of these sounds in itself that confirmed Creed's return to Bert.

It was the combination of them. Their spacing and pattern. Particularly the rhythm of footsteps approaching the door of the apartment. This was unmis-takably Creed. Bert waited for that door to open, quivering with a strange blend of excitement and rage.

Bert was twitching with tension as the key scraped in the old lock of the door. What was Creed doing? Why was it taking so long to open the foolish thing? Bert's bladder was bursting. It was all the small woman's fault.

As the door opened Bert launched himself forward, claws scrabbling on the linoleum of the kitchen floor, and shot past Creed, black paws flying, not even pausing to sniff Creed's crotch – he'd obviously met a woman in the course of the evening, a woman he was interested in – and bounded down the rickety old wooden staircase in the backyard where he urinated splendidly, all along the peeling white picket fence that screened the backyard from the street, carefully saving some for the corner where he had to respond to the challenge from the German shepherd.

Bert had been brewing a response to that particular bit of renal graffiti for a whole night now. A whole painful, piss-restraining night. He would have relieved himself on the kitchen floor, but he knew he dared not do that. He'd remembered being bad as a puppy and Creed standing glowering over him with a rolled newspaper, his whole posture radiating disapproval.

Creed had never had to use the newspaper, though he'd once rubbed Bert's nose in the unspeakable richness of his own mess. But puppy days were gone now and Bert had learned. The mere thought of Creed's disapproval was enough to fill him with shame. Bert didn't

want to be bad. So he'd held his bladder until Creed got home and let him out.

Creed watched with bemusement as Bert shot past him out into the darkness of the backyard.

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Where's my welcome home? Creed thought. Then he realized that the cleaning woman had locked Bert's dog door again.

The door was a hinged plywood hatch Creed had fitted over a hole he'd carved and sawed out of the wall beside the back door over the course of a long, hot weekend a few summers ago. Creed remembered lying on the kitchen floor, laughing and sweating, sawdust sticking to his face as Anna passed him a beer and he'd pulled flashing lengths of flexible metal ruler out and measured and adjusted the hole with drunken precision.

It was a very fine dog door and still gave him a jolt of pride to contemplate, even now. It came complete with a sliding bolt on the inside and the cleaning lady had slid this carefully shut before she left, in her meticulous, security-conscious way, condemning poor Bert to a night of torment until Creed had come back.

Creed walked through the apartment and opened the big window to watch his dog frolicking in the backyard. He didn't like to think of what might have happened to Bert if he hadn't come back at all. It was a point to consider for the future.

Tell Chavez that his wife and kids could look forward to a new pet.

Bert was dancing back up the stairs now, back into the kitchen to find Creed.

He was whining with delight at his master's return.

Creed caught the dog's head firmly and shook it in greeting, wagging it from side to side as Bert's stinking warm breath beat affectionately in his face. Creed was grinning. He felt himself relaxing as he played with the dog, coming down from the long tension of the day. He slapped Bert's heaving sides.

The dog was a strange mongrel blend, a spectacular example of the possibilities of genetic diversity, an intelligent, loyal dog. But ugly as sin.

Creed and Anna had found him one steely grey rain-swept morning on what was supposed to be a routine public health sweep of an abandoned apartment house. Neither of them had been in the job more than a month and they subsequently discovered that, as rookies on the police force, they were considered expendable. So they had been sent, quite deliberately, into an unknown situation. The house might indeed have been abandoned. But there were other possibilities. And the only way to find out was to send some cops in.

They'd parked their squad car directly outside the building and unclipped shotguns from the rack between the seats. The gutters in the street were blocked, creating a thin constant flood of rainwater that washed past the tyres as they got out.

Creed had looked up at the grim blank face of the building, its windows covered with nailed-up boards, and he turned to Anna and said, 'Let's not, and say we did.'

Anna just grinned, that lovely mouth of hers, warm brown eyes smiling into his. And she followed him as he went inside.

As they entered the dark house Creed was glad to have her at his back.

They'd shared a car for a week at that point and they had already begun to trust each other. They weren't yet lovers.

Inside the house there was a short, foul-smelling hallway leading to a rickety wooden staircase that rose into darkness.

'Of course, the electricity isn't on,' said Anna. 'That would be too easy.'

The only light came from the open door behind them. They slowly climbed the stairs towards the shadowy landing above. A cold breeze and the sound of rain followed them.

Upstairs Anna had taken the lead because she was the only one who'd been issued with a flashlight. The old house seemed deserted and silent except for the hissing of the rain. Doors on either side of them led to rooms which were only occupied by abandoned shopping carts, piles of scrap metal and empty wine bottles. After they turned a corner they were cut off from the grey glow coming through the front door and they were in total darkness.

That was when Anna lost the flashlight.

She was walking just ahead of Creed, holding it in her left hand, shotgun in her right, when the floor gave way beneath her. The thin worn linoleum underfoot tore open and Anna's legs went through the hole.

The shotgun saved her.

She had let go of the flashlight and it had tumbled through the opening.

But she held onto the shotgun, instinctively clutching the weapon with both hands. The shotgun spanned the hole, catching on solid floorboards on either side.

If she hadn't been clutching the gun she would have plunged straight down to the ground floor.

Creed got down on his knees and worked to free her without going through the hole himself. He was sweating in the darkness, only getting an occasional burst of light through the hole from the lost flashlight below.

Anna was telling him to go back to the car and get some rescue tools when Creed heard the things coming. Coming out of the darkness down the long corridor towards them.

He sensed more than heard them. He had no idea what they were except that they were coming fast, coming straight at Anna. He stood over her and fired his shotgun. The muzzle blast lit the hallway in a spinning lash of light, revealing white fangs and glowing amber eyes. Even as Creed killed the things they remained completely silent. He emptied the pump shotgun, then his handgun, using the final rounds just to illuminate the hallway, to make certain that there weren't any more of the shapes coming at them, sharp teeth 95

gleaming. Then he wrapped his arms around Anna and dragged her up out of the hole, back along the corridor onto solid flooring. Only when she was out of the hole, sitting with her back to the wall, shotgun levelled to protect Creed, did she let herself begin to sob.

The things didn't come back and after they caught their breath Anna and Creed crawled to the edge of the hole and looked through. Peering over the ragged lip of torn linoleum they saw the flashlight lying on the floor below, shining its beam into what appeared to be a

beautiful garden of gleaming crystal.

The glittering shapes were broken bottles, smashed at the neck and set in concrete so that their jagged edges were aimed rigidly upwards. If Anna had fallen onto them she would have been torn to pieces.

Creed used his empty shotgun like a walking stick to test the floor and they made their way around the hole. The corridor on the other side was safe to walk on. The dead things with the teeth turned out to be dogs.

'Why weren't they barking?' said Anna.

'Maybe they weren't pleased to see us,' said Creed. He abandoned the useless shotgun and borrowed Anna's sidearm. There were tiny, pencil-thin beams of light shining at them. They were coming through bullet holes in a door at the end of the hallway. Creed and Anna went through it together.

And that's when they found out why the dogs hadn't made any noise.

A middle-aged man in a dirty black raincoat was lying dead on the floor of the room. He had been hit by one of the stray bullets that had come through the door and caught him just under the chin. He'd been killed instantly.

The room was full of laboratory apparatus and gleaming surgical instruments. The biggest piece of furniture was an old kitchen table. Fixed to the table, squirming and terrified, was a small puppy. He was restrained by lengths of wire and black electrical tape.

On the table beside him were a syringe and a scalpel. His frightened brown eyes rolled in his skull and followed Anna and Creed as they inspected the room and pieced it together.

An operation was about to take place. The man had been ready to anaesthetize the dog and remove its larynx. After surgery the dog would never be able to bark again.

Anna and Creed later learned that this was a standard tactic in drug fortresses. Taken as puppies the dogs were operated on, then brutalized and starved for months until they were conditioned to attack intruders. When they were ready they were left to roam the dark corridors of a building.

Silent killers, they were trained to attack at crotch level. The mature

ones in the hallway would have disembowelled Creed and then torn Anna's head 96

off. She couldn't have used her shotgun without going through the floor onto the spikes below.

The hole in the floor was also a standard tactic. The drug dealers who ran the houses sealed off whole sections. They stretched lino over holes in the floorboards and established booby traps. Dogs roamed the dark hallways, too light to go through the lino. Customers knew the safe routes into the drug forts. Cops met with a surprise welcome.

As Creed and Anna set about freeing the puppy they heard the sound of feet rattling on the fire escape outside. They tore black paper off the window in time to see a dozen junkies and dealers escaping into the rain.

Upstairs they found the place deserted except for a three-year-old infant.

The child was filthy, covered with scabs and suppurating sores. He tugged anxiously at Creed's hand and told him solemnly, 'Watch out for the needles.

Don't touch the needles.' The child looked up at Creed through crusted eyes, anxious to impart this essential information. Discarded syringes lay on the floor all around them.

'Those were probably the first words he ever learned,' said Anna as they stood in the rain, watching an ambulance take the child away. Her voice was a little unsteady. She gave Creed a disinfectant tissue to wipe himself off where the child had touched him and then they went back into the building and brought the puppy out. He lay on a blanket on the back seat of the squad car, whining now and then as they took a corner. They drove him back to Creed's place.

They'd named the puppy Bert and Anna was so concerned about his progress that she became a frequent visitor, turning up with rubber bones and cans of chopped steak. And from there it was natural enough that she began to stay the night. It wasn't long before she moved in. There was plenty of room for the two of them and the dog.

Now a cool night wind was easing through the big apartment as Creed put away his gun and his sports bag. He opened a can of some anonymous brown protein and put it in Bert's bowl before going into the big living-room.

Creed knelt on the floor, a heavy stack of antique records tilted against his knees as he searched for an old favourite, a selection of serenades. He finally dug the LP out. Vaughan Williams, Delius, Françaix and someone else. Creed stared at the cover, looking for the composer's name. Warlock.

He put the record back.

Creed smoked until his throat was raw and the previous day was a distant echo, ebbing in his neurons. Finally he was able to stop thinking about the ones who had died that day. Larner and the kid whose name he couldn't remember.

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Then, as the morning sun was beginning to shine delicately on the walls, he went to bed.

He was asleep and dreaming almost immediately. But not of the kid or Larner as he'd feared and half expected. It was much worse than that.

He dreamed of Anna.

Creed woke up immediately. He threw back the sheets and got out of bed.

Bert whined from his basket as he paced to the far end of the living-room.

The apartment was the ground floor of an old house which had been sub-divided. On one wall of the living-room there was still a staircase that ran up to the next floor, although the door at the top had been taken out long ago, replaced by a smooth stretch of blank wall.

Now Creed sat on the edge of the stairs feeling sick and hollow. The stair-well seemed deeper, as though there were fathoms of dark air rising above him. He shifted forward and the creaking of the wooden stairs made a prolonged sound that began to frighten Creed. He could feel his emotions circling in himself, dangerous animals ready to go out of control.

He concentrated, staring at the chipped paint on an upright post of the staircase. It seemed sordid and sad, emblematic of a thousand anonymous wasted lives.

Memories of Anna kept trying to break through. He dodged them,

thinking about other things. Then finally he made himself look squarely at the memories.

She hadn't been anything much. She had been a small girl, very skinny.

The crescent shape of the contraceptive implant standing out starkly under the smooth coffee-coloured flesh of her slim arm. He could feel it when he held her in the dark, and he would rub her skin thinking what it meant. He imagined the crescent feeding her bloodstream with its payload, floating a chemical barrier between them, a fine net in an ocean, invisible there in the darkness, deep inside her body.

After the long violent days he would come home and find her in the apartment. Just stripping off her own uniform, pads of ceramic bulletproof armour on the floor around her as she stood sweaty and naked. She'd come into his arms and he'd feel the heat of her against him, starting at his belly and flashing up his chest. Her body damp against the thin cotton of the T-shirt he wore underneath his own body armour.

Bert would skulk off into the kitchen and lie down in his doggie basket, tail curled around him as Creed carried Anna through the apartment to the futon. He'd spread her body out on the clean white cotton, undress and lie beside her, pressing his body against her. They'd make love, bodies still oiled with the fear and anger of a day in the city. They'd shower then make love again, bodies aching for each other, desperate and grateful for the touch and 98

warmth and smell of each other, electrically alive after surviving another day in the war zone.

Then in the darkness he'd caress her arm and feel the crescent shape of the implant under her skin. It was working away silently and steadily, preventing their bodies from achieving any final resolution.

She had absurdly large ears which were normally kept hidden, but when her hair was scraped back they were revealed jutting from her head. They made her look like some exotic, beautiful creature. Once after watching a documentary on rain forest parks Creed told her she looked like a tropical bat, as indeed she did, and Anna had fumed with rage for days.

Her body had been small and flawless. He never tired of watching her: walking naked through the cold apartment in the winter with Bert clumsily pursuing her, grunting and worshipfully snuffling at her feet.

Standing on the edge of the bathtub, gently drying herself, rubbing her body with great thoroughness, the fluffy white towel a blazing snow white against her warm brown skin. Her every movement was a marvel of articulation. She was a perfect sum of perfect parts, seamlessly fitted together.

Lying in bed beside her he'd watch her sleep, eyes squeezed shut over strange beautiful cheekbones.

When they made love she had breathed in short staccato gasps like an animal. His hands remembered the smoothness of her skin.

Creed wrenched his mind away from those memories. He couldn't go on feeling these emotions. It had to change. He made himself think of the bad things.

He threw in everything he had. He remembered in detail every argument, every flaw, every piece of selfishness, bad temper and pettiness. The way her voice would break with insincerity. The arguments that dragged on in endless circles. Anna's shrillness, her childish moods, the sulking, her lack of respect for him. She hadn't been anything so special. She had criticized and nagged and complained endlessly.

Sitting there on a staircase that led nowhere, Creed soon hated her with a passion like a blowtorch.

Hours later he was still sitting on the stairs in a shaft of morning light that was rendered haunted by his exhaustion. He was tired and his mind was drifting; drifting away from the hatred and rage into more pleasant thoughts.

Creed found himself lost in a reverie of his lips on a cheekbone, of grazing the firm perfect curve as he moved up to gently kiss an eye. She had startling grey eyes, like pebbles seen under moving water. The kind that were so beautiful you reached into the water and touched them. But if you brought those pebbles out of the water they would lose that remarkable colour as soon as they dried.

That's the way Anna's eyes had looked when they unzipped the body bag and she'd stared blankly up at him and then they asked him to identify her.

And he discovered that he could still speak, that he owned a voice in

this strange new world he'd entered. The world without Anna.

They'd zipped the bag back up and he'd turned and walked out of the room thinking, this doesn't feel so bad; I can handle this. It isn't so bad.

It isn't as bad as I expected. I can handle it.

He'd walked carefully, like a man carrying something he didn't want to spill.

Now he stared at the peeling paint on the bannister knowing he had to get over Anna and knowing he would never get over her.

Chapter 13

The girl called Maxine's face was so close that Ace could hardly focus on it.

A bank of brilliant white lights shone above Maxine's head, making a few stray strands of hair glow like a halo. Ace stared up at the ceiling of the building and concentrated on it. The lights were fixed in frames mounted on wooden beams that ran under the corrugated metal of the roof. On one of the beams a tiny brown bird fluttered and resettled itself, peering down at her.

Ace wondered how the bird had got into the building. She wondered how she could get out.

Learn, Ace thought. Information is ammunition. The tin sheets of the roof looked vulnerable at the joins. There were brown patches of corrosion around the bolts that joined them. Presumably somewhere out of sight there was a hole at least big enough to let the bird in. If she could get up to the ceiling beams, using a rope or a ladder, she knew she could find that hole or create a new one. If she could force two of the metal sheets apart she could get out onto the roof. From there she'd only have the problem of getting to the ground safely.

If she could get free, the ceiling would be the way out. Ace began making detailed plans, plotting a route. It was one way of managing her fear.

'Was this place a barn once?' she said. Her voice sounded strange, echoing in the big empty room. Her mouth was dry and Ace wondered

if the warlock was beginning to have an effect.

‘Sure,’ said Maxine, her face coming back into focus as she moved away from Ace and went over to check the video camera that faced them, standing on a low tripod on the concrete floor. ‘It was part of the original farm, just like the one where we found you last night. That was quite a surprise for you, eh?’ Satisfied with the camera, she went back to where Ace sat beside Jack and Shell, all strapped in their chairs.

‘It certainly was,’ said Ace, trying to sound polite. She didn’t want to antagonize the woman. Not while there was a chance to learn something from her.

But Ace’s voice sounded strange even to herself. Maybe the echo was in her head and not in the barn.

‘The other barn’s mostly for storing equipment, doing repairs, maintaining vehicles. That kind of thing. And that’s where the generator room is.’

The generator. It made sense that an installation like this would have its 101

own power supply. Ace fixed the thought in her head. She suppressed the urge to get more information about the generator room. She didn’t want to create suspicion.

Maxine bent over Shell and Jack, checking that they were securely strapped in and immobilized. ‘This is the medical section. It’s also the place where we process the new livestock before moving it to the labs.’

‘Livestock? Meaning us?’ said Jack.

Ace bit her lip. She hoped he wouldn’t get Maxine angry before they learned everything they could from the woman.

But Maxine seemed unperturbed. ‘Not at all.’ She indicated the interior door set in the whitewashed wall. It was made of opaque pebbled glass and was abnormally wide. ‘That’s where we process the livestock. Through there.’

Ace filed this fact away, mentally congratulating Jack. Maybe the glass door would be a viable alternative to the roof.

‘What’s in the boxes?’ said Ace. All around them were metal shelves stacked with cardboard cartons. They absorbed sound, giving the concrete and metal room a soft acoustic. Ace had a pretty good idea what the boxes contained but it wouldn’t do any harm to confirm her suspicions.

‘Drugs,’ said Maxine. ‘Everything from aspirin to antivirals. Most of the testing we do is for pharmaceutical companies and this is where we store the stock. This building and the lab are the two secure units.’

Maxine finished checking the straps that kept them in the chairs and turned her attention to the chairs themselves. They were old-fashioned reclining dentist’s chairs, bolted to the floor. She adjusted the angle and height of each pair so they faced the camera squarely. ‘We want to record the expressions on your faces. Feel free to speak to the camera at any time and record your impressions.’

‘There’s one impression I want to record right now,’ said Jack. ‘But it involves a blunt Anglo-Saxon verb and you wouldn’t like it much.’

Maxine went over and switched the video camera on. ‘Listen,’ she said. ‘It’s only natural that you’re upset. But you got yourselves into this. There’s no one else you can blame.’

‘Want to bet? I blame you.’

‘You’re tense, you’re upset, you’ve got no idea of what’s going to happen to you. That’s understandable. I sympathize. No, I really do.’ Maxine adjusted a small comb in her thick black hair. ‘You know, I was going to do a drug trial myself. I volunteered. I knew it was dangerous but I needed the money. It pays pretty good and of course there aren’t any other jobs around these days.

But then Dieter discovered that I had a PhD. When he found out I could cook too that settled the matter. He likes his food, does Dieter. His food and his clothes. He offered me a full-time job.’

‘How can you do it?’ said Jack.

‘Come again?’ Maxine frowned. She held the comb in her mouth as she rearranged her hair.

‘Don’t play innocent. I know what sort of stuff you do in the labs, with your

“livestock”.’

‘They’re only animals,’ said Maxine.

Jack snorted with disgust. ‘That’s very imaginative. I can see you’ve really grappled with the deeper ethical issues here.’

‘And anyway, I’m just doing it until I’ve got enough money saved. Then I’m going to India.’ Maxine fixed her hair and went over behind the video camera.

‘How elfin and Bohemian of you,’ said Jack. ‘You make me want to puke.’

Maxine looked through the viewfinder on the camera. ‘Smile,’ she said.

‘What happens now?’ said Ace.

‘We leave you here until tomorrow morning and let the camera record the effect of the drug on you. Like I said, feel free to talk about your subjective impressions.’

‘What happens if I have to go to the loo?’ Shell’s voice was shaky.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll fit you all with catheters before I go.’ Maxine opened a metal cabinet and took out lengths of thin plastic hose coiled in sterile plastic bags. ‘And count yourself lucky that it’s me doing it. Tommy Hunnicutt volunteered to put these on for you. But he only wanted to do the girls.’

The Hunnicutts were busy in the centre aisle between the prefab hut they used as an infirmary and the shelves of medical supplies. Pam was helping Tommy with one of the metal trolleys they employed for moving animal cages. The wheels on the trolleys were always giving them problems and Pam was bent down with a spray can of oil. Tommy tilted the trolley so she could get at the wheel to apply it. They both looked up as Maxine came in.

Tommy Hunnicutt let Maxine help him with the trolley. ‘Looking forward to lunch?’ he grunted.

‘You’re not missing anything that wonderful,’ said Maxine. ‘It’s just buttering up some potential clients.’ Actually, she was lying. Dieter always rolled out the red carpet when the drugs companies came to visit and the food was going to be superb. She ought to know, she’d

been preparing it with her own hands for the last week or so. A range of pâtés – both meat and vegetarian – hot and cold slices of roast beef, chicken breast glazed with ginger and soy sauce, devilled eggs, goat's cheese quiche, new potatoes dressed in tarragon vinegar and deep-fried mushrooms with garlic mayonnaise. Plus the wide range of expensive wines that Dieter had gone into Canterbury especially to ferret out.

'It's all a bit of a bore, really.'

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Tommy wasn't deceived. 'Well, I hope you and Pam have a good time,' he said with heavy sarcasm.

'Someone has to look after the laboratory,' said Pam. She never put up with any nonsense from her brother.

Maxine could see that Tommy was sulking. 'I helped you capture those creeps last night, didn't I?' he said.

'Yes, with an empty gun,' said his sister. 'Now, get these animals on the trolley and take them over to the lab.'

'I know, I know.' Tommy looked at the caged cats and dogs in the corner of the room where they'd been waiting since being sprayed for fleas and other parasites.

'I'll be joining you in the labs as soon as lunch is finished.'

'I won't hold my breath,' said Tommy.

'And don't forget to replace that light-bulb in the annexe.' Pam turned away and punched her security code. She went out of the back door of the barn with Maxine following her.

Tommy sighed as they left. He glanced over at the animals in the corner, a strange thrill of excitement running through him.

Alone at last.

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Chapter 14

'What's Ace up to?' Benny asked.

‘I’m not sure that I know,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m not sure that she knows herself.’

Benny was sitting in her cubicle in the New York skyscraper. It smelled of damp and the ancient reek of scorched electrical cables. She leaned back in the office chair she’d borrowed and stretched her arms, studying the mass of cables that hung down from the ruined ceiling, casting octopus shadows on the pitted concrete walls. Her shoulders were stiff from keeping her face in line with the video camera above the phone screen. The screen itself was dead, blank except for her own reflection; there was no corresponding camera at the other end. The Doctor could see her but she couldn’t see him.

‘Is it something to do with the same mission I’m on?’

‘Quite possibly. This affair is assuming some very interesting dimensions.’

‘That’s good,’ said Benny. ‘I’d hate to think you might be getting bored. Are you sure you don’t want me to steal you a warlock pill?’

‘No,’ replied the voice of the Doctor. ‘But try and involve yourself with the lab tests IDEA is conducting.’

‘So you want me to steal their results for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. Those lab people are like a separate department,’ said Benny.

‘And they seem pretty hot on security.’

‘I should hope so,’ breathed the big Texan, winking at Webster. They sat watching Benny’s face on the screen. She was frowning as she listened to the disembodied voice of the Doctor.

‘Don’t put yourself in any danger. Just test the water,’ they heard the man called the Doctor say.

‘Okay. I’ll take a crack at it tomorrow. I’ll get back to you then, about the same time.’

‘Good. Meanwhile I’m going to pursue my own enquiries at this end.’

‘What have you got to go on?’

‘Just a few ideas,’ said the Doctor.

‘Good luck. I’d better go now.’ Benny bent forward, ready to switch off her videophone.

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But the Doctor suddenly said, ‘By the way, are you sure this communications link is secure?’

Benny hesitated, looking irritated. ‘It ought to be. I’m using a computer system which no one else touches and which has been officially dead for years.’

Webster and Mr Harrigan grinned at each other. On the screen Benny waved and then faded slowly to black as she cut the connection. There was a wash of static as the Doctor switched off at the other end. Mr Harrigan turned the sound down on his computer and looked up at Webster.

‘It’s a real shame we’ve only got this fellow’s voice. If we had his image we’d also be able to see the background, the place where he lives.’ He sighed and leaned back in his chair. ‘I’ve got an image enhancement package on this thing that would curl your hair. Give me the view looking over the guy’s shoulder and out of one of his windows and I could plot a trajectory for a helicopter attack.’

Webster and Mr Harrigan both chuckled. ‘And you might be able to work out where he lives,’ added Webster.

Harrigan frowned at him. ‘Are you saying you haven’t been able to trace the call?’

‘Oh, sure. We traced it to Baltimore, Kathmandu, Medicine Hat and Alexan-dria, Egypt. This guy’s got a smart system. He’s sending his transmission simultaneously through a thousand different routes. He could be anywhere in the world.’

‘But you’ve got his system bugged?’

‘I sure have. I’ve got some very smart incursion and surveillance software.

‘I know, son. I damned well ought to know. I paid for it. Did a good job, huh?’

‘Yes, sir. It not only told me what kind of hardware was receiving the signal, but also what other equipment was linked to it. So we went inside and took a look. I did a kind of guided tour of his software.’

‘You checked out his entire network?’

‘As much as I could without being detected. It’s a real stealthy little program.

Its first priority is not to get caught.’

‘Good. And what did you find?’

‘The guy’s got some toys that are out of this world.’

‘What does Miss Summerfield call him?’

‘The Doctor. I can keep track of everything he does on his computer from now on. Communications, data access. I get a copy of any program he runs.’

The Texan nodded slowly. ‘Well, maybe you can keep an eye on him while I talk to this fellow.’

‘No problem,’ said Webster, moving to one of the other chairs nearby.

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But the big man was no longer even listening to him. He was already concentrating on the next thing on his schedule. He touched a control on his computer and spoke into it. ‘Send in Mr Chavez, please.’

Webster turned around as the office door opened and he watched Raymond Bowman step through, holding a rifle. Raymond really took himself far too seriously. It was like he was always starring in his own private spy movie.

Lucky his wife was as nutty as him, otherwise Raymond would be one more sad, lonely loser carrying a gun.

Webster watched as he gestured silently and Christine Bowman came through, her gun also ready, her head swivelling back and forth with great alertness as though she was coming into an unsecured crime scene instead of her boss’s office. She looked carefully back down the corridor and beckoned.

A moment later she was followed by a portly man.

Webster recognized the fat cop who'd been sweating in his body armour at the Mayans' apartment. The one who looked so pissed off at the IDEA interference. He didn't look too happy now, either.

'Can't you guys take a crap without getting your guns out?' he said.

Harrigan smiled. 'All our important guests get an armed escort.'

Chavez sat down in the chair Webster had vacated, directly in front of the desk. He looked Harrigan in the eye. 'If you want to butter me up, you could try giving me some of that bourbon.' The big Texan chuckled and reached for the bottle of Wild Turkey. Behind him the Bowmans each found a chair.

Raymond began methodically stripping down his weapon and checking that all the moving parts were clean. Webster ignored them, phasing everything out as he concentrated on his computer screen.

The big Texan took another glass from his desk drawer and poured a whisky for the cop. 'Thanks for coming out here to see us, Mr Chavez.'

The cop sipped his drink. 'So, you got some problems you want to share with me?'

'Well, this is a little embarrassing, so I hope you'll bear with me.'

'I'm listening.'

'It looks like one of our people might actually be working for the enemy.'

'And who's that?' said the fat cop.

Harrigan bent down, reaching under his desk and dragging out the picnic cooler they used for the confiscated drugs. 'The girl you met at the Mayans'.'

He grunted as he put the cooler up on the desk. 'Calls herself Miss Summerfield.'

'No, I'd already worked that out.' Chavez swirled his drink casually around in his glass. 'I meant who's your enemy?'

Harrigan flushed with anger and slammed a meaty hand on the cooler. 'The kind of scum who's peddling this poison on our streets.'

‘Amen,’ said Chavez dryly.

‘What do you know about this stuff called warlock?’

‘Not much. Our labs haven’t even had enough samples to test it properly.’

‘That’s too bad.’

‘Too bad but not surprising, when you consider that the IDEA insists on confiscating every single white pill we find.’

‘Can you blame an old soldier because he has one last crusade?’ The big man came out from behind his desk and stood in front of Chavez’s chair, towering over him. Chavez could smell the whisky and cigar smoke on the Texan. ‘One day soon this tired body will drop in its tracks,’ he said, his voice a low, lazy drawl.

But not before this speech is over, thought Chavez. Unfortunately.

The Texan continued in his unhurried fashion. ‘Right now, however, there’s a war on. Against the vermin who sell this stuff. The ones who grow rich on the agony of the addicts. They let young kids destroy their minds. Rot their bodies with lethal viruses from dirty needles. The ones who turn this evil into cash.’

The Texan perched on the edge of his desk, sitting there breathing heavily like a man exhausted after a long race. ‘And I’m not about to quit until we find the source of this poison and put the suppliers behind bars. We want to catch the big fish this time. Once we’ve nailed these bastards, then I can die in peace.’ His glass glinted as he raised it in toast to Chavez.

‘Admirable sentiments,’ said the fat cop, raising his own glass. ‘We’d like to find out where this stuff is coming from, too. But we’d also like to know if it is physically addictive, whether it has a psychedelic effect, whether it’s injectable. All things that you seem to be assuming, Mr Harrigan.’

The old Texan grinned. ‘You speak your mind, Mr Chavez. And you’ve got quite a mind to speak. I like that.’

‘Save the bullshit and pour me another whisky please.’ Chavez leaned forward and handed his glass to the old man. ‘If you really want to know about warlock you ought to talk to my man Creed McIlveen. He can speak his mind pretty good, too.’

‘In fact, this young Creed fellow is the reason I brought you here.’ Harrigan went back behind his desk and settled his bulk into the big leather chair. ‘I was wondering if you could spare him for a few weeks.’

‘What?’ Raymond Bowman had suddenly looked up from the gun he was working on. ‘We’ve already had one crook working for us. Isn’t that enough?’

Chavez turned around in his chair to look at Bowman. ‘Who’s saying my man’s a crook?’ Behind him the old Texan sighed. ‘He’s right, Raymond.

You’re jumping the gun here.’

‘I’m jumping the gun?’

‘We’re short-handed now that Miss Summerfield is under suspicion. I’ve got to replace her, son.’

‘Why? We could just stick with the core team.’

The old Texan sighed again. ‘I need someone who can handle warlock.

Someone who can go undercover and deal with the users and not freak out.’

‘Not a common skill,’ said Chavez. ‘Do you know how many officers have got killed handling this stuff?’

‘I’m afraid I do,’ said the old Texan. ‘We had a team who infiltrated a drugs buy in Monterey. But the pushers had dropped warlock before the negotiating began. And they sniffed out my team like a hound tracking down a raccoon.

They killed all of them. Other times our agents have been forced to take a dose of the stuff themselves and it’s wrecked their minds for good. You’ve never seen such fear on a human face.’ He leaned back in his chair and fumbled for a cigar. For a moment, despite his great size, he seemed a frail old man.

‘That’s why it’s such a shame about Miss Summerfield. She proved she could take warlock and handle it. She could stare the beast right in the face. Smart, brave girl.’

‘Yeah, good old Miss Summerfield,’ said Chavez. ‘What a great girl. Except it turns out she’s a ringer. And you had her working undercover on the same bust as Creed. And I was not informed of any of this. My man’s life was in danger because you put a dirty cop on the same assignment.’

‘We don’t really like to think of ourselves as “cops”, Mr Chavez, and I really don’t think your man was in any danger. Miss Summerfield did a good job. It just turns out that her loyalties are a little more. . . complicated than we were initially given to understand.’

‘Who’s she working for? Where did she come from?’

‘Well, we were led to believe that she was on loan to us from IDEA in Europe. She arrived here with impeccable credentials. But now new facts have come to light.’ The big Texan nodded at Webster, who looked up from his computer screen and smiled modestly before returning to his work. ‘And so we did some checking and we found out her credentials are forgeries.’

‘Forgeries.’ Chavez nodded unhappily, as if he understood but still couldn’t believe it.

‘Yep. Her ID card, her staff file and even a handwritten letter of commen-dation from our sector chief in Antwerp. I’ve sent it to our calligraphy people and they had a real good time with that. It’s almost perfect, except it was written in cold tea by someone who was ambidextrous, has learned English as a second language and who isn’t very tall. The computer stuff has all been perfectly forged, of course. Digital is easy to fake.’

‘Great.’

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‘So, Mr Chavez, you can imagine my disappointment when I discovered that I’ve got a girl working for me I can no longer trust. And that leaves me short-handed at a critical time.’

‘Mr Harrigan –’ said Bowman.

‘Hush, Raymond. I need to replace her, and I need someone who can deal with this warlock drug. As far as I can see, that gives me a choice of exactly one candidate. Your man Creed. Will he do it?’

‘I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him?’

‘I intend to.’

After Chavez had gone, Harrigan got up from his desk and wandered around the office, looking at Webster, busy with his computer, and the Bowmans, both bent over their guns, preoccupied with their endless readiness checks. ‘I think we should send for Artie,’ he announced. ‘He’s the only remaining member of the team who isn’t present. Except for Miss Summerfield of course.’

Christine Bowman whispered something to her husband and he nodded. ‘I think maybe we should wait a minute.’

The old man’s smile faded. He turned his stony gaze on the couple. ‘Is that right?’

‘We should sort a couple of things out.’

‘Such as?’ The old man adjusted the knot in his shoe string tie and inspected his reflection on the glass surface of one of the desks.

‘Such as whether we actually need a replacement for Summerfield,’ said the Bowman woman.

‘Chrissie, dear, we’ve been through all this.’

‘And in particular,’ said Raymond Bowman, ‘Whether we need that strung-out junkie on the team.’

The big Texan kept peering down at his reflection in the glass desk. ‘Are you questioning my authority, Raymond?’

Chrissie spoke quickly. ‘We think the decision-making process around here needs to be more of a group activity, Mr Harrigan.’

‘Do you now?’

‘And we want to register our unhappiness at your choice of personnel with psychological instabilities.’

Now the old man turned away from the husband and focused his full attention on Chrissie Bowman. Webster was glad that cold gaze wasn’t directed at him. ‘That’s a bit ungenerous of you, Chrissie,’ he said. ‘Especially when you consider how much slack I’ve cut certain other members of the team with their own – what was your phrase?’ He paused for a moment. ‘“Psychological instabilities”.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Chrissie. But Webster could see that she was shaken. Her husband Raymond hurried over to join her. ‘Are you all right, Chrissie? What’s he talking about?’

Harrigan walked over to the desk were the Bowmans sat side by side. ‘You don’t know?’ he said, feigning surprise.

Chrissie Bowman touched her husband’s arm, as if she was trying to end the confrontation. But he shook her off and stood up, toe to toe with the big old man. ‘No,’ he said, looking Harrigan in the eye.

Harrigan scratched his head. ‘Well, frankly, I’m amazed. You two kids being married and all.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Hasn’t Chrissie shared the tragic story with you? That terrible business about her father?’

Webster saw the fight go out of Raymond Bowman. He sat down and looked away from the big man. ‘That doesn’t have any bearing on this,’ he muttered.

Harrigan patted him on the shoulder but he remained sitting limply. It was as if the Texan had used some ultimate weapon that Raymond had believed was out of bounds.

Webster looked at Chrissie Bowman but she was staring fixedly at the carpet.

The silence in the room was getting pretty uncomfortable by the time Artie arrived to join the meeting.

Webster watched Artie closely while the old man told him the news. Artie had been a big fan of Benny’s and now he had to hear she was a traitor. But Webster thought he took it quite well, only asking if their information about her was definite.

‘Pretty much,’ said the Texan, a little sad himself.

‘Well I guess that’s that. What’s going to happen to her?’

‘Miss Summerfield is interested in finding out what the secret of warlock is. So am I. She can join the lab team working in this building. While she’s helping them work on warlock we’ll be keeping an eye on her.’

‘That’s pretty slick,’ conceded Artie. ‘It’s like you’re locking her up but she won’t even know it.’

‘Yep.’ The old Texan nodded. ‘I’m putting her in prison but the whole King Building will be her prison. And all the time she’ll be doing valuable work for us. After all, she’s still on the payroll.’ He grinned and his whole face folded into wrinkles. ‘Now, would anybody else care for a glass of this good whisky?’

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Chapter 15

‘Don’t get too pissed,’ said Tommy. But he waited until his sister was safely out of earshot. He stood at a barred window watching Maxine and Pam walking across the lawns towards the big farmhouse. He felt himself begin to tremble with reaction. He hated it when this happened.

This morning he’d woken up in a good mood and he might have been able to maintain it all day if this hadn’t happened. His sister had always had the knack of sending him crashing into rage and spiralling frustration. Why did she have to treat him like a kid? He was nineteen years old. And that remark about the empty gun. He thought only Dieter had known about that. Now Maxine knew too. His big sister just couldn’t resist humiliating him in front of her.

It wouldn’t matter if these emotions just faded away. But they didn’t; they stayed with him and they got worse, like ruts digging ever deeper in his mind.

It reminded Tommy unpleasantly of being a child, utterly vulnerable to his own moods.

School had been the worst. He remembered the feeling of plunging terror he used to get when he sat down in a classroom and realized that there was nothing the teacher could say or do that would even remotely interest him.

He knew more than most of the teachers did about the subjects they taught.

But he was still condemned to sit there hour after our, numb with boredom.

Not all the lessons were like that, of course. He could always lose

himself in the beautiful abstract symmetries of mathematics and there was also the glory that was the biology lab. But those lessons only occupied a few hours in each week's timetable. The rest of the time he was forced to sit in the slow-motion horror of boredom until he was finally released to go stumbling into the corridor feeling dazed and sick.

And the corridors were just a different form of torture. The corridors and the playground. They were, if anything, worse than the classrooms. At least the tedium of the classrooms was a known equation. Outside, at the mercy of the other children, anything might happen.

Not that Tommy was bullied. Sometimes one of the other children tried to pick on him but they soon learned to be wary of his big sister. Chubby and formidable, Pam had no hesitation about wading into battle on his behalf, grabbing some kid and swinging him around by his collar until he learned his 113

lesson.

But there were other bad things besides being bullied. Like girls. The girls didn't bother Tommy until he hit puberty. Then everything changed. Going from child to teenager was a nightmare. Suddenly he was painfully self-conscious about every moment of his waking existence. He couldn't walk across a room without feeling the girls looking at him, without sweating with anxiety and awkwardness.

Tommy felt that he had been turned out of Eden. Childhood had been a paradise compared to this new world of savage embarrassment and self-awareness. He wished he was invisible so that the girls wouldn't notice him.

But the more he tried to evade their eyes, the more he singled himself out.

They looked at him and giggled and Tommy knew why. He was ugly and he was clumsy and he stank. His face became crusted with acne and his skin and hair became oily, and the girls laughed all the harder.

But every cloud has a silver lining. If it wasn't for the way the girls tormented him, he would never have discovered natural justice.

Because the world is ultimately a good and sane place. Crimes do not go unpunished.

Tommy remembered when the idea first came to him.

He was sitting in the biology lab, working after school one dark winter evening. It struck him like a revelation. The lab had recently acquired a litter of hamsters for the children to feed and look after. Tommy had suffered some particularly vicious little jibe from the girls during lunch that day.

He didn't have to hear it to know that they'd said something about him.

He saw them giggling. He knew they were talking about him. How could they be so vicious? Didn't they know what they did to him? His face flushed with embarrassment, sending his pimples an emphatic hot red and causing the greasy sweat to flow in his armpits. All it took was that one stifled giggle.

He was certain he'd heard it.

So that winter evening, alone in the blissful silence of the biology lab, Tommy had found the answer. He looked up from his book and saw the cage full of hamsters. Then he looked across the room at the cupboard where they kept the bottles of hydrochloric acid.

Tommy was all alone and he could do whatever he wanted.

That evening Tommy had discovered the system of natural justice. After that, whenever a girl treated him viciously, he simply took note of the incident, calmly and dispassionately. And then he waited until he could be alone in the school lab with the animals.

Tommy worked out an elaborate system from which he never deviated. After all, this was justice, not revenge. Bad behaviour towards him was trans-lated into specific procedures. Tommy never kept notes because notes can be 114

discovered. Instead he kept all the details in his head. The things the girls did to him each day and the corresponding things he would do to the animals each night. The acid or the glass rods, sometimes the bunsen burners. If the behaviour of the girls was sufficiently nasty he might be forced to use his scalpels.

There was no shortage of animals. Tommy was the sixth form honour student and he was allowed to place orders for the biology lab. Only he knew exactly how many rats, hamsters, guinea pigs or rabbits were in the school at any given time. Where they went and what happened

to them was purely his responsibility.

If people had discovered what he was doing they would have been sickened by it, Tommy knew that. But it wasn't his fault. It was the girls' fault. After all, they made him tense and unhappy. In a sense, they were doing it to the animals, not him. If they just behaved decently towards him he wouldn't need to pursue his system of natural justice.

As he grew older, Tommy's acne faded and he became a handsome young man. The girls' behaviour towards him underwent a superficial alteration.

Sometimes they would smile at him or strike up a conversation, perhaps praise him for an essay he had written or a scholastic prize he'd won.

But Tommy could see through their deceit. He knew the malice and pettiness that was concealed beneath their smiles. And the punishments had to continue. It was harsh, but fair. And the grim justice of it gave him pleasure.

Tommy was a well-adjusted, happy teenager. His only worry was what to do when he left school and the supply of animals became problematical.

But of course, in the end he'd landed on his feet.

Tommy stood at the window of the animal storage unit watching Pam and Maxine disappear into the big farmhouse. On the circular drive two cars had already arrived, bearing the clients from the pharmaceutical company. They were all going to be laughing around the big table soon, eating a huge meal and drinking vintage wine. Tommy felt a rising wave of hatred for the lot of them, but most of all for his big sister.

There was a time when Tommy wouldn't have known how to cope with this rage. But not now. Now Tommy was a balanced individual. He knew exactly what to do.

He glanced up at the security camera mounted high on one wall. It was of the kind used in banks and it had been installed because of the drugs stored in this building. A stipulation by the insurance company. A screen back in the big farmhouse enabled you to keep an eye on anyone going through to the drugs store. It would also let Pam check on whether Tommy had taken the animals across to the labs. And he

wouldn't put it past his sister to do exactly that.

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But Tommy had no intention of going through the lengthy procedure of logging in the new animals at the lab. Not just yet.

Tommy got the three cats and one of the dogs – not the black bitch, Sean had a use for her – and loaded their cages onto the trolley. He switched on its electric motor, grabbed the trolley's handle and trundled it towards the glass door. The trolley moved with maddening slowness as he pushed through the glass door into the room where the drugs trial was being conducted.

The two girls and the man were strapped into their chairs facing the video camera. They didn't seem to notice Tommy but, considering the dose of the drug they'd received, that was hardly surprising.

There was a strong smell of sweat in the room, though, and an even stronger smell of some kind of perfume or aftershave. It was an odd smell. It reminded Tommy of a box of liquorice candies he'd once left lying on the window-sill in the sun until they'd melted into a black, aromatic mess. The smell brought vivid images of childhood flooding back. He remembered that it hadn't been him who'd left the liquorice on the window-sill. It had been Pam. His sister had taken his sweets and hidden them from him and by the time he'd found them they were ruined. Tommy remembered the smell of them and the bitter taste of his own tears. Pam had always been doing things like that.

Tommy switched off the trolley. The buzz of the electric engine faded away.

He steered it to the corner of the room, out of sight of the video camera. The three cats and the dog watched him warily as he checked that their cages were secure.

Then Tommy turned and hurried out of the building. He went back through the medical area and out through the back door of the barn, heading for the labs.

Tommy had an appointment with natural justice and specimen number 417.

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Chapter 16

For one horrified moment Creed thought that his dog had used his doorstep as a toilet. The thought gave him a nasty turn because Creed prided himself on having brought his dog up as a well-adjusted, stable kind of individual. He felt a warm flash of relief when he realized that it was just a curled autumn leaf which had blown on to the porch. Creed stepped over it, amused at the perfection of the illusion, and unlocked the front door of his apartment.

He set the bag of groceries on the floor as Bert jumped up and down to greet him. The sun was pouring through the windows in his living-room and he felt a prolonged surge of happiness.

The euphoric mood lasted almost a full minute. Then Creed felt his heart sink, the way it always did. He was trapped here in his apartment with nothing to do when he should be out working.

It was normal procedure to spend a couple of days off duty after a major operation. He hated the inactivity but he'd learned to live with it. But he'd never spent so long out of action as he had since the Mayan bust, and Chavez refused to give him a new assignment or even to discuss the matter.

In fact, Creed had begun to feel like Chavez was avoiding his calls. He'd gone down to the station house once in person, but that hadn't proved any more successful. There was something going on and Chavez wouldn't tell him about it.

So here he was, cooling his heels at home with Bert asleep in the basket in the kitchen. Creed had used up so much nervous energy taking him for walks that the dog had begun to hide whenever he took out the leash.

Creed paced aimlessly around the apartment. How was he going to fill the hours ahead?

Creed had resolved to clean up his act. There had been two small sachets of coke in the spice cupboard in the kitchen. He'd flushed them down the toilet, although not without regret. Various kinds of speed he'd ditched in the same manner; Creed had never been very fond of amphetamine derivatives. You talked too much and your eyes looked like mad doll's eyes.

The boo he'd got rid of by the simple expedient of smoking it. All the pills, enough to fill a big cereal bowl, all the colours of the rainbow, he'd taken to a public incinerator and burned.

All except one.

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The small white tablet was in front of him now, sitting on top of a hardback book. Creed picked up the pill and held it carefully between his thumb and forefinger. It was curious; the distinctive liquorice smell hadn't diminished at all.

But even as he thought this Creed realized that the powerful odour was ebbing. It faded and then it was gone. It had been emphatically there a moment earlier. Now it was undetectable. Was it his imagination?

Creed held the tablet close to his nostrils. He could smell nothing. He held it closer still, so the coarse, grainy edge of the white pill was touching his nose. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

He couldn't smell anything from the pill at all, although he could distinctly detect the fragrance of oil on his fingers from working on the turntable. He rubbed the edge of the pill with his thumbnail, hoping to release some trapped odour. Still nothing.

But it was an oddly comforting sensation just to touch the tablet. The feel of it on the skin below his nose made Creed relaxed and tranquil, as though he had accidentally applied pressure to some vital acupuncture point. The shape of the pill and its grainy texture gave him the strangest sensation of utter peace, the hard pebbled shape of it a tiny jut of urgency below his nose. Where it touched him his skin felt cool, as though some clean, relaxing medication was seeping into him. The white pill was almost touching his lips, a small white pebble. The tiniest movement of his fingers would bring it between his lips. He wondered what it would be like just to pop it into his mouth and crunch on it, perhaps releasing the strange flavour.

At the instant Creed thought this, the liquorice smell came rushing back, pouring powerfully out of the tablet. His nostrils were suddenly full of it. He felt an intoxicating rush. The pill smelled like exotic candy. Creed experienced a moment of total primal greed, a child with a candy in his sweaty fist and no moral or intellectual structure to separate thought from action. Holding the pill and eating it seemed inseparable parts of the same whole.

The liquorice smell was filling his mind like cool smoke. But the pill didn't seem like candy any more. That was too complicated a concept. Instead he felt the tiny shape near his mouth connecting with him in

some far more basic way. He was hungry and it would feed him. That was when he knew what the texture reminded him of: smooth but coarse, rough grained and soft. The small, pebble-hard urgency. A nipple.

Bringing the thought into consciousness should have broken the spell but it only made it stronger. Creed needed to put the pill into his mouth. In the kitchen he heard Bert whine in his basket but the sound was disconnected, random noise conveying nothing to him. He felt the edge of his thumb sliding down his sweat-slickened face and suddenly the pill was there between 118

his lips, giving a powerful flash of sensual memory, the taut bud of nipple triggering deeper levels of association and emotion.

Anna. He remembered her small breasts against his face, the firm curve of them, the feel of her as they made love. The hungry yearning on her face. A flash of her eyes caught in moonlight as curtains stirred over their bed. The terminal blankness of those same eyes as they zipped the body bag shut.

The memory gave him a physical pain that ran from his chest down to this groin, as though he'd been gutted with a blunt knife.

Creed lifted the pill away from his face. He was surprised to note that his hand was steady as he put it back down on the table. As soon as it was there it looked strange, as though the tablet was out of context when he wasn't holding it. Its natural place was back in his hand.

Creed shook his head, as though he was trying to shake the thoughts out of it. 'Nice try,' he said aloud. Then he realized he was talking to the pill.

Creed got up and went into the kitchen. Bert peered anxiously up at him from his basket and whined at him. Creed wanted to kneel by the dog and play with him, but his knees were shaking. His shirt was soaked with sweat.

If he got down on the floor he wasn't sure he could get back up. He felt ridiculously weak. When was the last time he'd had something to eat?

Creed's memory seemed to be functioning sluggishly. To hell with it. He went to one of the cupboards and took out a can of tuna. He opened it and flaked it into a glass bowl with a fork. He mixed in mayonnaise and sweet Swedish mustard. There were half a dozen

onions sprouting in the bottom of a vegetable rack so he chopped the green sprouts and peeled the withered bulbs, discarding the soft layers until he was left with firm, pearly globes which he sliced into rings. He mixed the onion into the tuna salad then reached for one of the tiny dried red peppers that were hanging in a bunch from the ceiling. As he broke the brittle pod between his fingers he realized that Bert had climbed out of his basket. The dog was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor watching Creed, wagging his tail.

Creed found some sliced sourdough bread in the freezer. He toasted four pieces of it and spooned the tuna salad onto it while it was hot. Then he found a mouldy chunk of Canadian cheddar, trimmed the green mould off its six edges and grated the clean yellow cheese onto the open sandwiches in tiny crescents like wood shavings. He melted the cheese under the grill and opened a can of dog food for Bert. While the dog was happily lapping at his bowl Creed sat at the kitchen bar and ate all four sandwiches, washing them down with half a litre of milk.

He waited for the meal to settle then drank a cup of fresh coffee. He did a hundred push-ups, his gusts of breath stirring dust and fluff off the hard wood floor each time he jerked downwards. It was time to clean the place 119

up. After an hour sweating over a mop and broom he showered and changed his clothes and went back into the living-room. The white pill was still sitting there, waiting on the book on the table. Creed found his phone underneath a pile of magazines and set it down beside the pill.

He punched the number for Chavez's direct line but it was busy so the phone system in the station house routed him through the switchboard to the narcotics unit. A voice he didn't recognize answered the phone on the second ring. Creed had the disorienting feeling that everything was changing behind his back, even though he'd been away from work for less than a week. He asked for Chavez and gave his name.

There was a long silence before the unfamiliar voice came back on. 'Hey,'

said the cop. 'Creed McIlveen. Aren't you Jimmy McIlveen's brother?'

'That's right,' said Creed, pleased to note that his voice didn't betray any emotion.

‘I knew Jimmy. Great cop.’

‘Yes, he was.’ Creed suppressed the urge to scream at the guy to shut up and just put him through to Chavez.

‘That was a terrible thing that happened to him.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I was one of the first ones to arrive on the scene. I remember the night. It was snowing.’

‘Yeah, look. Listen –’

‘They figured a sniper from the rooftop across the street.’

‘Listen –’

‘I can’t believe they never found the guys who did it.’

‘Listen, can you just put me through to Chavez?’

‘Sorry, Creed. He can’t take your call at the moment.’

Creed pushed the kill button on the phone and set it down on the table.

Right beside the white pill. His hand hovered over the pill for a moment. He thought of Jimmy dead in the snow and he thought of Anna zippered into the fresh vinyl stink of the body bag and he thought about Chavez not taking his call.

Bert made a small sound in the kitchen as Creed picked up the pill and swallowed it.

They parked in the shade on the far side of the street.

They’d had to borrow a car from the IDEA motor pool. The van wasn’t available because IDEA transport personnel were stripping the hardware out of it.

‘That’s his place over there,’ said Artie, checking the address on the printout.

‘You know, I still can’t believe that stuff about Benny.’

‘That’s why we’re here,’ said Raymond Bowman. He was sitting in the front of the car beside his wife, wearing a black baseball cap and sunglasses that matched hers. ‘We want to check this guy out and make sure we don’t repeat that mistake.’ Although they were officially off duty, both of the Bowmans were wearing handguns and combat vests under their black jackets.

‘Webster said we were just supposed to bring the guy back with us. He didn’t say anything about an interrogation.’

‘Forget Webster,’ said Chrissie, slipping the transmission lever into park. The Bowmans simultaneously swung their doors open and stepped out of the car, leaving Artie to scramble after them. The couple crossed the street just as a string of traffic roared past and Artie had to hang back. By the time he caught up with them they were at the top of the stairs outside the building, Raymond holding the screen door open and Chrissie going in. Artie saw that they had their guns out.

‘Hey, wait a minute.’ But it was too late. There was nothing to do but follow them inside. Artie found himself in a big open kitchen that led through to a living-room at the front of the house. There was the sound of barking and Artie went in to find the cop called Creed sitting on the floor holding onto an ugly-looking dog.

Both of the Bowmans were standing tensely, holding their sidearms in the businesslike two-handed stance that was taught at the academy. But they both looked a little uncertain, as if they didn’t know whether to point their guns at Creed or at the dog who was barking so furiously.

Artie didn’t like the way this was shaping up. The cop was supposed to be working with them, a fellow team member, not the subject of a bust. But at the moment Creed was the only one in the room who seemed calm.

‘Okay, okay,’ he said. ‘Everybody take it easy.’

‘Make the dog shut up.’

‘How am I supposed to do that?’ Creed stroked the dog’s head. ‘Come on, take it easy, Bert.’ The dog’s sides were shaking as it barked, pointing its muzzle at the intruders, jaws heaving. Creed looked at them. He didn’t seem at all bothered by the guns. ‘Listen, if he’s freaking out, it’s because he’s picking it up from you. If you would just relax, so would he. Try putting the guns away.’

‘I think not,’ said Raymond Bowman. ‘Artie, grab the dog and take him outside.’

‘Me? What if he bites me?’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake,’ said Creed. Before any of them could react he was on his feet, moving towards the kitchen, dragging the dog with him.

‘Don’t move!’ shouted the Bowmans in unison, spinning to keep their guns on Creed. But he’d already opened the door and shoved the dog out.

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‘Relax,’ he said. Chrissie Bowman grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him back into the living-room. As he stumbled past, Artie could smell a strange odour coming off the guy, like the smell of an exotic liqueur. He wondered if the cop was drunk but then he got a look at his eyes. They were wide open, the pupils very dark. No, Artie realized, the guy was stoned.

Chrissie gave Creed a final shove which should have sent him sprawling but instead the cop took a graceful sideways step and settled down on the couch.

‘So how can I help you?’ he said. Sitting there, looking calm and composed, it was oddly as if he’d invited them all into his home. Artie found himself grinning. The guy had balls: you had to give him that.

Neither of the Bowmans seemed to know what to say for a moment. Then Raymond turned to Artie. ‘Give the place a once-over.’

‘What am I looking for?’

‘Just do it,’ said Raymond.

‘If it’s drugs you’re after I’m afraid you’re a little late.’ Creed reached for something on the littered coffee table in front of him and instantly Christine drew a bead with her pistol. ‘Don’t move,’ she said.

‘Oh, come on,’ said Creed. He was holding a remote control in his hand and as he fingered a button on it the room filled with music. Lingering, edgy string instruments playing something sad and complex.

‘Turn it off,’ snapped Raymond.

‘What are you, my father?’ said Creed. He pressed another button on the handset and the music went down a little but not off.

Artie didn’t mind; he was quite enjoying it. He sneaked a look at the display on the CD player; the music was by Bartok. Was that a solo artist or a group?

Artie went round the room, looking behind furniture, opening drawers in an antique desk, standing on tiptoe to peer at bookshelves. He felt a bit stupid at first. After all, this wasn’t a real bust. The whole thing was just a piece of territorial pissing by Raymond Bowman. He wanted to shake Creed up, show him who was boss. But it didn’t seem to be working and Artie was secretly glad.

He began to take an interest in looking around the apartment, the way you would if you poked in anybody’s private stuff. Particularly if you knew them a little. The disorder in the bathroom reminded him of his own place. In the bedroom there was nothing but a big futon, a dresser with some clothes dumped on top of it and a mirror fixed to the wall. He saw the corner of a photograph sticking out from behind the mirror, as though it had been stuck to the wall and had come loose, slipping behind there. He fished it out and found himself looking at a younger, happier Creed with his arm around a beautiful black girl. They were both grinning straight into the camera. Artie felt a sudden sense of trespassing on the guy’s privacy. He carefully pushed 122

the picture back where it had been.

Back in the living-room he saw that the Bowmans had handcuffed Creed.

Creed was still sitting on the couch, more relaxed than ever, the Bowmans watching him, more tense than ever. The dog was barking outside, a monotonous endless sound. It was clearly getting on their nerves.

Artie felt a strange kind of paranoia growing in the room. It was partly to do with the nerve-jangling noise of the dog, but it was also partly to do with the stoned cop sprawled on the couch, head bobbing to the music. The liquorice smell was stronger in the room, as if someone had been burning a scented candle. Artie began to wonder what kind of drug Creed had taken.

Artie decided he didn't like the strained silence in here. He went back to nosing around and soon found himself fascinated by the huge collection of antique records the guy owned. Thousands of them, leaning in untidy piles around the walls.

'Hey,' he said, flipping through the LPs, 'you've got some great music here.'

He pulled out an album with a picture of a naked girl striding across a blue sky. Artie recognised it from a CD his older brother used to own. He read the band's name on the cover. 'You like Free, do you?'

Even as he said it, Artie felt uncomfortable. Creed was sitting on the couch, locked up in handcuffs and here he was talking to him about 'free'. Creed almost flinched when he said it. The word seemed to echo in the room. It sounded like he was deliberately trying for a double meaning, mocking the cop.

Maybe he was just imagining things. But he wasn't the only one. He saw both of the Bowmans react. It was like his words had this hidden message and everybody in the room was aware of it, though nobody was admitting to it.

Artie felt an overwhelming need to apologize. 'Hey,' he said.

But before he could finish his sentence Creed interrupted. 'Sure, I like Free,'

he said. He stirred on the couch, his handcuffs clinking on his wrists. 'But I also like Bad Company.' He smiled at Artie.

The Bowmans exchanged a worried glance and Artie understood why. It was like he and Creed were talking in code. On one level Free and Bad Company were just the names of hands. But on another it was like Artie and Creed were having a whole private conversation.

Artie was apologizing for the handcuffs and Creed was saying not to worry.

He knew they were only temporary. He knew this was all bullshit. He knew he was going to be part of the IDEA team. And he was looking forward to it.

That's what he meant about liking bad company. Bad company was them, the team. Artie and Webster and even the uptight Bowmans. And Creed would be joining them. He grinned at the cop and the cop

grinned back.

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Christine Bowman lifted her gun. ‘Get up,’ she snapped. It was as if she had to break the mood, the growing sense of camaraderie between Creed and Artie.

Creed obeyed her, climbing off the couch, moving slowly. The warlock he’d taken had made him a little lightheaded and he felt clumsy in the handcuffs, as though he couldn’t protect himself properly if he stumbled and fell.

‘Come on,’ said Christine. Creed glanced at her. In his drugged state every sound in the room seemed to have taken on an odd significance. Especially the human sounds. The noises of the others breathing was like a supple wave of background sound, easing in and out of his awareness. And every breath carried its own message. Take Artie, for instance. Creed knew almost from the moment he’d entered the apartment that Artie was in conflict with the other two, and that he didn’t mean Creed any harm. You could see it in obvious things like the halfhearted way he conducted the search or the fact that his gun was still in its holster. But it was also in his posture, and his tone of voice.

Things that the warlock made very clear to Creed. Countless small perceptual clues.

And the breathing. Especially the breathing. He could tell from his relaxed breathing that Artie thought the whole thing was a farce. And the strained breathing of the couple told him they were increasingly uncertain about what they were up to.

But the breathing was nothing compared to the talking. As soon as Artie began to speak, Creed knew that he was on Creed’s side. It was like they were old friends. Within about three sentences their relationship had been defined and Creed had learned a lot about the way Artie felt about the other pair. He regarded them with a mixture of fondness and contempt and impatience.

And now the woman was talking to him. All she said was, ‘Get up,’ but she was telling him things about herself she couldn’t begin to imagine. Every word was like a window into her mind. She gestured with the gun as he got to his feet.

Creed tried not to let her see how carefully he was listening but he

could tell she had picked up on it. That was one of the weird things about this drug.

It seemed to have an effect even on those who hadn't taken it.

Creed knew he was behaving a little strangely. On some subtle level he was giving off all kinds of signals. And he'd triggered some psychic alarm in the woman and she was reacting to those signals. She looked as if she was sorry she had spoken, but she wasn't about to quit.

'Lie on the floor.' Creed slowly got down on his knees, but all the while he was listening to what she said, holding the words in his mind and analysing them. It was as if there were two meanings to the sentence. There was the obvious command, but then there was the hidden message, too. It was one of 124

the words. It stood out from the others, like a mountain range on a topological map. Some subtle emphasis in her voice singled it out.

'I said lie down.' There it was again. The word 'lie'. It was as if she couldn't say it without drawing attention to it. She might as well be highlighting it with a pink marker pen. Creed wondered what it meant.

'Move away from the couch,' said the woman. She was speaking more quietly, as if self-conscious. It was like everyone in the room was listening to her and her voice was being blotted out with shyness. Even Bert had stopped barking in the backyard.

'Keep moving,' she said. 'Farther away.' Again Creed did as he was told. As he moved clear of the couch the woman stepped over him and began to frisk him – something they should have done even before they put on the cuffs.

Creed hardly felt her hands on his body. He was listening in fascination to what she'd said. Again one word stood out from the other. It was red hot while the other words were cold. The word was 'farther'. Except Creed had the odd feeling this wasn't exactly what she'd said. She hadn't really said,

'Farther away.' She'd said, 'Father away'. That was the word.

'Father.'

Lights exploded in Creed's head. He felt a sudden brutal shock of pain.

Everybody in the room was yelling and out in the yard Bert resumed barking furiously. It took Creed a second to work out what had happened. The woman had stopped patting him with her hands and then suddenly smashed him on the head. Maybe with the butt of her gun. As the flashing lights cleared from his vision Creed looked up to see the two men holding onto her, restraining her.

'Shit, Christine,' Artie was saying.

'What the hell are you doing?' The other man was as shocked and angry as Artie. 'Why did you hit him?'

'He made a move. He was going for me.'

'No he wasn't. He didn't do anything.'

'He was going to hit me,' said Christine.

'I've had enough of this,' said Artie. 'You guys have gone too far now. We're in deep shit.'

'Come on,' said the other man. 'We'd better be going. Bring him out to the car.' He led the woman towards the door as Artie helped Creed get to his feet.

'Sorry about that, man,' he said. 'I don't know what got into her.'

Creed didn't say anything. The pain in his head was easing and as it went the surprise and fear dissipated to be replaced by a pure luminous flame of rage.

Creed didn't like people hitting him.

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His mind was working at high speed, lucid and clear. His hands were cuffed behind his back but that shouldn't be any problem. Artie manoeuvred him out the door and he saw that everything was falling into place. He was going to teach these suckers a lesson.

The other IDEA guy was halfway down the stairs but the woman was standing just outside on the porch, holding a gun on Creed in case he tried to make a break for it. That was the last thing Creed had in mind.

Because Christine was stepping slowly sideways as she watched him. Her foot was hovering over the dried leaf Creed had noticed earlier.

He saw his opportunity and seized it.

‘Watch out for the dog turd.’

Everybody’s eyes went to the glistening brown shape as Christine’s boot descended on it. She winced.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Creed. ‘I’ll make it disappear.’

Everyone went quiet. They were looking at Creed. Then they looked at Christine. She slowly lifted her boot up. There was nothing under it. The dried leaf had simply crumbled to dust. There was nothing remarkable about it but there was no way the others could know that. They looked at Creed again, silent and scared. As far as they were concerned, he had just performed an act of magic.

They got into the car in silence, Christine Bowman at the wheel and her husband beside her. As they pulled away, Artie looked nervously around at the cop sitting beside him. There was a deep blue bruise forming on Creed’s forehead. He was staring straight ahead, watching the streets pass, expressionless. No one said anything and finally Artie began to relax.

They were about halfway to the King Building when Creed suddenly leaned forward. ‘So, Christine,’ he said in a quiet, conversational tone, ‘what was the lie you told about your father?’

Christine Bowman’s body jerked as though she had received an electric shock. The steering wheel twisted in her hands and the car slewed across the road in a fast, dangerous diagonal. An approaching taxi hit its brakes and horn simultaneously, skidding to a screaming halt just before it collided with them. Artie saw the face of the driver convulsing with shouted obscenities.

Another car in the opposite lane swung around the stalled taxi, saw them too late and clipped their car on the right rear corner with a sound like a gunshot.

Everything was moving in slow motion for Artie. He saw the the entire street pivot around them as they went into a lazy spin.

Raymond Bowman was frantically wrestling with his wife for control of the wheel. One of them managed to stomp on the brakes and rubber screeched in scorching protest. They’d just about managed to kill their speed as they bounced up onto the sidewalk and slammed into a street lamp with sickening

abruptness.

Christine was sobbing at the wheel. Beside her Raymond was struggling alternately with his seat-belt and his door. There was the clicking sound of a seat-belt release and Artie thought he must have managed it, before he realized that the sound was Creed's belt. Before Artie could move Creed had opened his door and was out of the car. He was on the same side as Raymond Bowman and as Raymond finally opened his own door Creed was ready for him.

While Bowman was still half in and half out of the car Creed simply let himself go limp and fell against the door with the full weight of his body.

The car door took a huge crunching bite at Bowman's arm and shoulder. He screamed with pain.

'I don't like people pointing guns at me,' said Creed, getting back up on his feet. As the door swung back open on the rebound Bowman toppled out onto the sidewalk, hugging his ribcage. But by now Creed had gone around the other side and was reaching in for Christine. Artie dragged himself out of the car, reaching for his gun, but Creed merely pulled the woman out and dropped her on her backside in the gutter. 'And I really don't like being hit,' he said.

Christine wouldn't look at him. She just sat, sobbing like a child among the discarded soft drink cans and filth. Creed turned away and looked at Artie.

'I guess you'd better drive,' he said.

Benny was standing looking out of the window when the car pulled up below the King Building. Even from this height she could see that it had been damaged in a crash, the hood and radiator grille buckled. She saw the Bowmans get out of the back and Artie step out of the front seat. There was a fourth person in the car but before she could see who it was, Mr Harrigan said something and she turned back to watch the activity in the laboratory.

The lab was a long, narrow room flanked by sinks and chrome work surfaces with glass storage cupboards above and below them. Most of the central area of the room was occupied by the chemical analysis hardware. Benny couldn't help noticing that it was about thirty times the size of the set-up the Doctor had in the garage at Allen Road. And certainly less efficient.

‘We’re nowhere,’ said the big Texan, confirming her private opinion.

Mr Harrigan was standing beside the lab technician, watching the results come out on long sheets of printout embellished with coloured inks. They’d been analysing samples of warlock all afternoon and the results were inconclusive, to say the least. Harrigan tore off the length of printout and studied the analysis curves.

‘What about this one?’ he said. The lab technician just shook his head.

He was a pink-faced young man with an unruly sheaf of wheat-coloured hair.

Benny thought that he looked like he was ready to cry. Harrigan crumpled the printout and tossed it to him. ‘It’s just the same as all the others, isn’t it?’

‘No, Mr Harrigan. It’s different.’ The technician smoothed out the paper on a lab bench and stared at it.

‘That’s exactly what I mean, boy. Every time we’ve done this test we’ve got a different result. And this one’s exactly the same. Different.’

‘I don’t understand it. I’ve recalibrated the equipment twice today. There’s nothing wrong with it.’

‘Of course there isn’t. It’s not your machines. It’s this god-damned drug. It’s like it knows we’re testing it and it doesn’t want us to learn anything about it.’

‘Or perhaps it’s like the behaviour of subatomic particles,’ said Benny. ‘At a certain level of sensitivity you can measure the influence of the observer.’

‘And what the hell does that mean?’ Harrigan’s anger had previously only been directed at the technician but now he aimed it at Benny and she was a little shocked. Normally the Texan exhibited an old-fashioned gallantry which she’d begun to like; to rely on, even.

‘Well,’ said Benny, ‘the behaviour of the particles changes when you study them. It’s as if they get self-conscious with someone looking over their shoulder.’

‘Same damned thing,’ said Harrigan. ‘Exactly my point. This stuff

knows we're looking at it and it doesn't like being looked at.' The old man snatched the piece of printout from the technician, wadded it up and threw it in a waste-paper basket. 'Same old same old,' he muttered in disgust. The technician hovered nervously behind him.

'We still have plenty of samples to enable subjective testing.'

'To hell with that, boy. You want to get some volunteers in here to gobble that stuff? Then what? They write a dissertation about what they feel?'

'We were thinking more in terms of a video recording, with the subjects relating their experiences and narratizing in real time.'

'Narratizing my ass.' The big Texan stalked towards the door, the technician trailing after him. 'I've got more than enough reports on what this drug does when it goes into someone's head.' Harrigan turned around and jabbed a finger at the technician. 'I want to know what it does when it comes out.'

'When it comes out?'

'Yeah, that's right. For God's sake.' Harrigan wearily rubbed his face with his big callused hand. 'Haven't you worked that out? What am I paying you for? I know more about this shit than you do.'

He spoke slowly, emphasizing each word, as if making a point to an idiot or small child. 'Warlock has an inward effect. It increases your sensitivity to what's happening. But it's got an outward effect, too. It increases your ability 128

to make things happen.' He tapped his own head. 'What's inside here gets projected outside. Haven't you even noticed that?'

'Well, there are certain studies which deal with what has been called behavioural extension or projection of affect –'

Harrigan made a sound of disgust, then punched the lab door open and walked out. The technician hurried after him.

Benny watched them go, frowning. Harrigan's description of warlock was disturbingly accurate. She remembered how it had felt when the Mayans gave her the drug. As though her thoughts and emotions were flowing out into the room, visible to everyone else. But more than that, the sensation that things in her mind had a tangible effect on external reality. It was as if the secret world of the mind could be

turned inside out. But how did Harrigan know that?

There was a sudden chittering sound and Benny turned around quickly to see another sheet of chemical analysis results emerging. It flopped out of the printer, waiting to be read. She stood motionless for a long moment, making no move to look at it. All afternoon she'd observed this routine. The technician loading samples into his equipment, pushing buttons and waiting for the printout.

But this time it was different. This time no one had loaded a sample. This time no one had pushed the buttons.

There shouldn't be any printout.

The laboratory was empty and silent except for the faint purring of the air conditioning. The glass doors of the cupboards were shining in the late daylight. The taps and sinks and work surfaces gleamed. Benny stood looking at the printer and the sheet of paper that shouldn't be there.

Finally she made herself tear it out of the printer and spread it on a work surface.

At first glance the printout was just the usual chaotic sequence of peaks and dips, a mountain range in thick strokes of ink. Then Benny turned it sideways and it resolved itself into huge bold loops of handwriting.

Danger. Get out immediately. Come home. D.

Webster sat with his computer in his lap, waiting tensely while the big Texan finished talking to Raymond Bowman. Although, thought Webster, talking wasn't really the word. The old man's voice was more like a prolonged shout.

'Did I say that this man was to be harassed? Did I say he was to be handcuffed and beaten on the head and dragged here like some trussed-up animal?'

'He caused the car crash, Mr Harrigan. He could have killed Christine. He could have killed me or Artie.'

'Yes, he caused your god-damned car to crash. After you put him in irons.

After you tried to cave his skull in.'

'I'm sorry about all that. I was just –'

'You were just making sure that Creed was good and scared of you. So when he joined the team he'd know who was in charge. Well you're damned right he'll know who's in charge. Because it's going to be him.'

'Is that really wise?'

'Who else should I get to head up this operation? A failed attempt at a bully?'

'No, sir.'

'Or maybe your helpful little wife? Do you realize she could have killed that man? Given him permanent brain damage?'

'He antagonized her sir.'

'I doubt it. That girl's just plain unstable. It's time you faced the facts. I don't know what's she's told you about her background but the Agency has done some digging and I know the truth of the matter. So listen up and I'll tell you all about it.'

Bowman glanced at Webster sitting uncomfortably behind them. 'Do we have to discuss it in public?'

'No, son. We don't have to at all. We could, theoretically, have a nice private chat. Just like you could, theoretically, have brought Creed McIlveen here in a civilized fashion instead of with a knot on his skull.' Harrigan leaned across his desk. 'Here's the scoop on your sweetheart. A victim of repeated brutal child abuse by her father, she finally got hold of daddy's gun and offed him.'

Webster turned away and concentrated on watching the screen of his computer. But not before he saw the look of pain on Raymond's face.

Harrigan's voice was a low, relentless snarl.

'That's the official story.

Teenage girl driven to kill in self-defence. The local police bought it. The DA bought it. But the Agency didn't buy it. We have forensic skills and psychological profiling that makes those hicks look sick. We did a deep analysis on little Christine's background. Here's the real scoop.

Daddy never touched her. It was all lies. She blew him away because she had a whim to do so. That girl's a natural born killer. Which has its uses. But not when she starts on our own personnel. Do I make myself clear?'

Raymond Bowman spoke so quietly that Webster could hardly hear him.

'Yes sir.'

'Good, now get out of my sight.'

After Bowman left the office Harrigan sat in silence at his desk, staring blankly ahead. Webster wondered if the big old man had forgotten that he was there. But then the fleshy head turned and the deep sunk eyes focused on him.

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'What have you got for me, son? Good news?'

'I'm afraid not, sir.'

'Well let me have it.'

'Benny's left the building. She got past security and stole that car Artie and the Bowmans were using. She's gone and we have no idea where.'

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Chapter 17

'Help us. Help us, please.'

'Just relax,' said Ace. 'Try not to panic.' Although she was strapped into the chair she could see Shell if she twisted her head far enough to the left. Ace tried to make eye contact with the girl and offer some kind of reassurance.

But Shell ignored her, staring up towards the ceiling. Ace followed her gaze and saw the small bird she'd noticed earlier, perched on the rafters, bobbing its tiny head and looking down at them. 'Please help us to get out of here,'

said Shell. Ace wondered for a crazy moment if she was addressing the bird or, more rationally, perhaps talking to Jack. But a moment later it all became clear when Shell said, 'We honour you, the spirit of

warlock.'

'It's all right.' Ace turned her head to the right and saw Jack watching her.

'She always gets like this when she's high,' he said. 'At least, she does when she's high on warlock.'

The smell of liquorice was heavy in the barn.

'Warlock will help us.' Ace turned at the sound of Shell's voice. The girl was looking at her. 'Warlock helped me to find you,' she smiled. Her broad, sensual face was glowing. Above those strong Slavic cheekbones her eyes reminded Ace more strongly than ever of a cat's. Now they looked sleepy and heavy-lidded.

Despite her tattoos Shell could look strikingly beautiful at unpredictable moments. This was one of those moments. 'The girl in the old house on Allen Road,' she said. Her eyes glowed as she smiled at Ace. It was a hungry smile, almost lascivious. Those rich, full lips curving irresistibly, ripe and infectious with. . . what? Mirth? Desire? 'The girl who lives with him. I had heard stories about him. Some people said he didn't exist. But I believed. And I found the house. And I found him. And I found you.' She looked at Ace with sleepy, sensual eyes. 'I came to blow you a kiss through the gates. Warlock helped me.' Her voice was low and husky. Seductive.

'Horny little thing, isn't she?' said Jack, with equal measures of pride and disgust in his voice.

Shell ignored him. 'Warlock will help us now,' she whispered. Then she fell silent, as though an unpleasant thought had suddenly occurred to her. 'I'm sure.' But she didn't sound sure. There was a sudden disquiet in those glowing eyes. 'But warlock is a sacrament,' she said. Uncertainty was dispelling that 133

smooth, lazy voice. 'It's powerful. It shouldn't be abused.' Ace could hear the girl's voice tightening, rising in pitch as the tension grew in her.

'Hey, Shell. Take it easy, girl,' Jack said.

'Warlock has been dishonoured,' said Shell. 'We were compelled to take the drug. We had no choice. We haven't invited warlock into our minds. Warlock has been forced to come to us. Warlock, we have dishonoured you.'

‘I thought you said she always gets like this.’

‘This is worse than usual.’

‘She’s talking to the drug like it’s a person.’

‘Sure,’ Jack nodded. ‘It’s all that shamanistic crap. You know, like peyote.

Mescalito. The notion of hallucinogenic drugs as messengers from the spirit world. Or car park attendants or something.’

Ace smiled at the bearded man. ‘Remind me to buy you a drink when we get out of this.’ She was grateful. Shell’s weirdness had begun to unsettle her, but now she was relaxing, again thanks to Jack. She could see that as she grew calmer, Jack in turn was relaxing. It was like a cycle, a feedback mechanism reducing the tension in the room.

Until Shell screamed.

A wordless shriek of sheer terror. It instantly shot raw fear through Ace.

Human beings are programmed to be frightened by certain stimuli. Evolution has selected those stimuli. It makes sense that the most frightening thing is another human being’s fear. Something that makes another human scared is a good thing for you to be scared of. If you want to survive, your ears are attuned to that fear. When someone screams in utter terror you react from the very core of your being.

Now it was as if Shell’s terror had burst out into the room and taken root in Ace’s heart as well. She fought to control the huge payload of adrenalin that exploded in her body. Jack was saying something. Ace forced herself to listen his words.

‘I think she’s have a bad trip,’ he said. He had gone pale himself.

Ace could feel goose-flesh prickling on her own bare arms. The temperature in the barn had dropped sharply. When had that happened? Ace hadn’t noticed the chill gathering but now the big shadowy room was icy.

Shell was breathing jerkily, making shallow panting sounds.

‘She’s really scared.’

‘She’s starting to scare me,’ said Ace.

‘Warlock has been dishonoured,’ muttered Shell. Her voice was shaking with terror, hardly coherent. ‘Terrible things are going to happen.’

‘This has never happened before. Come on, Shell. Chill out.’ As he spoke the words Jack’s breath fogged in the cold room. ‘She’s having a bad trip.’

Ace shivered. ‘Then we have to comfort her,’ she said grimly. Panic had started spreading among them and she didn’t know where it was going to stop. ‘We have to talk her down. Before. . . ’

‘Before what?’

‘We just have to talk her down.’ She turned to look at the tattooed girl.

‘I’m trying,’ said Jack. ‘I just wish I wasn’t tied in this damned chair. Please, Shell. Take it easy.’

Ace could see he was getting nowhere. Shell was staring up with a scared pale face, not even registering her boyfriend’s words. ‘Let me try,’ said Ace.

She cleared her throat. Jack was right, she felt helpless, strapped in the chair, unable to touch Shell or comfort her. She had to make do with her voice, and the ideas she could express with it.

‘Listen to me, Shell.’ Ace fought off her own fear and made her voice calm and gentle. ‘Can you hear me?’

A tiny voice spoke after a long silence. ‘Yes.’

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘Ace.’ The frightened girl could only talk in single gulping syllables.

‘That’s right.’ Ace made her voice warm and approving, a reward for a good child. ‘I’m the girl who lives in the house on Allen Road.’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen the sign on Allen Road?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen the way some kids have altered that sign? With paint?

They’ve altered one of the words. They’ve changed the word “Allen”. Have you seen that?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’ve only changed the word a little bit. They’ve made it into a new word.’

‘I know. I’ve seen it.’ Ace’s heart leapt when she heard Shell say this. Just a few shaky words. But not the terrified monosyllables of only a moment ago.

‘That’s right. I’m Ace and I come from that house. I live there with him.

When they change that word on the road sign it’s him they’re thinking about.’

‘I wish he was here now.’ Tears were flowing freely down Shell’s cheeks, gleaming on her coarse, sensual, flower-child face.

‘So do I. But I’m here. And I know what he’d say. He’d say not to be scared.’

Ace made her voice as gentle and comforting as possible.

‘I think you’re getting through,’ Jack whispered. He obviously didn’t want to break the spell.

Shell sniffled, full of snot and tears. ‘I can’t help it. I can’t help being scared.

Warlock has been dishonoured.’

‘Don’t be scared of warlock.’

But warlock will be angry. I’ve known people who’ve OD’d on warlock.’ Ace was amazed at how rational the girl was now. She was stringing shaky words together in coherent sentences. ‘And bad things happened to them. Warlock punished them. Warlock doesn’t like people who take overdoses. It makes warlock angry. And warlock will be angry with us. We’ve taken an overdose.’

‘No we didn’t. We didn’t take an overdose, Shell. We were forced to take one. People made us do it. Warlock will understand that we’re not to blame.

Warlock will be angry at the other people. Not us. Not me. Not you.’

‘Nice going,’ whispered Jack. He was right. Ace could see she was making progress. Shell’s face was still wet with tears but an expression of calm was coming over it, like an invisible hand caressing the girl’s face, smoothing away the anxiety. As she relaxed, so did Ace, heaving a sigh of relief. She couldn’t believe she’d done it.

A smile was beginning to spread across Shell’s full lips. ‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Warlock is good. Warlock will help us. Come to us, warlock. We honour you.’

‘Oh Christ, she’s off again,’ said Jack.

Shell whispered huskily, ‘We invite you, warlock. Come to our aid now.’ Up in the rafters the small bird stepped out into space and descended with its short wings flapping briskly.

‘Help us punish those who have dishonoured you. They are evil. You know what goes on here. Help us escape. Then when we escape I promise we’ll help punish the evil ones.’

‘I’m not sure this is an improvement,’ said Jack.

‘Help us and help our animal friends.’ Now Shell was staring at the cages that the teenager had brought into the room on his electric trolley. There were four cages. In three of them cats peered out; in the fourth a dog lay glumly hunched. The animals were intermittently visible as they moved around inside. Ace had wondered at first if one of the cats might be Chick but the two she could see were both older and larger, a plump white cat and a pretty, ink-black one with a splash of white on its nose. But the fourth cage on the trolley was angled so she couldn’t see into it properly and only a familiar yowling finally revealed to Ace that this was where Chick was housed.

As if attracted by their voices, the small bird fluttered overhead for a moment then flew across the room and settled on top of the cages on the trolley.

It stood there watching them, small head swivelling. In the cage beneath it the black cat peered up and bared its fangs, letting out a

thin cry of frustrated longing.

‘Come to us, warlock. Help us to escape.’ Shell’s voice had taken on a singsong quality.

‘I hope she’s not going off the deep end again,’ said Ace.

‘She’s not. Don’t worry about her,’ said Jack. ‘This is normal behaviour when she takes the stuff. She’s really well away.’

‘I don’t feel anything yet,’ said Ace.

‘Neither do I.’

‘Do you think they gave us different dosages?’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Jack. ‘Shell’s done warlock plenty of times before.

The more often you take it the more susceptible you become. She responds really quickly.’

‘Have you ever tried it?’

‘Sure. A few times.’

‘What’s it like?’

‘Hang on to your hat,’ said Jack.

‘That’s not very helpful or informative.’

Despite being strapped into the chair, Jack managed a pretty good shrug.

‘It’s different every time. Depends on your surroundings and your situation and the people you’re with.’ He suddenly grinned at Ace. ‘You’re not doing too good on any of those.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Ace smiled back. ‘The company could be a lot worse.’

She admired Jack’s spirit. If she could manage to get free he would be a definite asset in any escape attempt.

Once again Ace began systematically testing the straps on her chair. There were five of them, broad strips of heavy-duty synthetic fabric of the kind used in car seat-belts. They were tight, though not uncomfortable, but their positioning made it virtually impossible to achieve any useful movement.

The bottom strap was just above Ace's ankles, and the next one ran across her at mid-thigh. Neither of these mattered much. It was her hands Ace needed to free. But the upper three straps ran above her breasts, across her elbows and above her wrists. She was totally immobilized.

Nonetheless, she kept testing them, pressing against each strap in turn. The one running across her wrists was the most crucial. If she could slip out of that one it would be possible to –

'Escape,' said Shell. It was as if she had read Ace's mind and for a moment it gave her a nasty shock. But then the girl moaned. 'Escape,' she said again.

'Warlock. Please help us. We must escape. We need your help. Walk among us, spirit of warlock.'

She was rambling. It was obviously just a coincidence. But sweat was prickling all over Ace's body. Perhaps because of Shell's increasingly oddball behaviour, she'd begun to feel a bit strange herself. The smell of liquorice was heavy in the room and her scalp was crawling. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation. It was as though a warm electric current was running across her 137

head, like slow-motion excitement, gently stirring her hair. Ace wriggled her fingers, stretching them, trying to slip her hands out from under the strap.

'I tried that.' Jack was watching her. 'But the bastard things are on too tight.'

'Keep trying,' said Ace.

'Okay, but it won't do any good.' Jack began squirming around in the chair, flexing his big fingers. 'You might be able to slip out, though. You're thinner than me.' Jack winked. 'Better looking, too.'

Ace couldn't help smiling. 'You're taking this really well.' She couldn't believe the difference between the reactions of this fat bearded guy and his spacey girlfriend. Speaking of which. . . Shell had now lapsed

into a low singsong murmur, like a child reciting a bedtime prayer. Ace didn't think she even sounded sane.

'I'm always good in extreme situations,' said Jack. 'When there's an emergency I'm just fine. It's everyday life I can't seem to handle.'

'Amen,' said Ace, smiling.

At that exact instant Shell stopped muttering her child's prayer and spoke a single word, loud and clear.

'Amen,' she said.

She had spoken the word in perfect synchronization with Ace. She opened her eyes and turned and looked at Ace, smiling.

'Warlock is coming,' she said. Ace found herself riveted by the girl's gaze.

Shell's face was as pale as milk, giving strange emphasis to her dark eyes, wide open and stoned, and the vivid shapes of her tattoos.

Ace's attention focused on the bright splash of red in the centre of Shell's forehead, the tattooed flames with the tiny black bird rising from them. Shell's dark eyes regarded her steadily. The tiny crimson flame blazed. The black bird flew up her skin. Rising up, launching itself off into space. Flapping its –

Wings exploded in Ace's face, flapping frantically. Ace shouted as the tiny tattooed black bird came alive, wrenched itself from Shell's forehead and threw itself into Ace's eyes, alive and growing –

No, that wasn't what happened. Ace frantically tried to control her racing heartbeat. It was all right. Everything was all right. Shell's tattoos were not coming to life.

'Are you okay?' called Jack. Suddenly the bar was as cold as a meat locker.

'Yes. It's just this damned bird.' The tiny bird had left its perch on the animal cages and was fluttering busily around Ace's head. 'It startled me, that's all.'

Her heart was still hammering in her chest, so hard that she imagined she could see her body shaking.

'It's probably the warlock, as well. It's starting to take hold.'

‘Do you feel it too?’

‘Yeah. Our voices are starting to get kind of echoey. That always happens to me with this stuff.’

The bird was out of sight now, somewhere behind Ace’s head. It annoyed her that she couldn’t turn around far enough to keep an eye on it.

‘Warlock is here,’ announced Shell, her voice a mixture of awe and satisfaction. ‘The spirit of warlock is here among us.’ Suddenly she shouted at the top of her lungs. ‘Welcome!’

‘For Christ’s sake,’ said Ace.

‘Take it easy, Shell,’ said Jack.

But Shell had fallen silent again, her breathing heavy and fast in the quiet room. The sudden violence of her shout had set Ace’s heart pounding. She found herself breathing quickly and shallowly, in near perfect unison with the tattooed girl. On the other side of her Jack started coughing.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Jack fought for breath, finally bringing the coughing under control.

‘Just a touch of asthma. I get it now and then. Mostly when I’m in a situation like this.’

‘You mean when you’re drugged and kidnapped?’ said Ace.

‘No.’ Jack smiled. ‘When I’m in a room with animals. It’s just an allergy thing. Not ideal for an animal rights activist, I know.’

‘What did you do with Sheba?’ Ace corrected the past tense. ‘I mean what do you do with Sheba?’

‘We keep her outside. She had a bed in the shed in Shell’s back garden. She only comes indoors for mealtimes and about twenty-three other hours in the day.’ Jack tried to smile but he was still wheezing and Ace noticed that his gasping breathing was falling into the same pattern as hers and Shell’s.

In the silent room the three of them were breathing like a single entity.

Maybe it was the drug, sending subliminal signals back and forth, causing their respiratory patterns to synchronize.

'Listen,' Jack's voice was suddenly urgent. 'We've got to get out of these chairs.'

'We will,' said Ace, and she meant it, although she had no idea how they could manage it. She felt a fierce anger kindling in her. A powerful, simple desire to escape from the bonds that held her. There had to be a way.

The small bird fluttered back into view and Ace watched it, following every movement as if fascinated. The bird seemed to be sucking all her attention towards it. She could feel the drug operating deep inside her now, causing her thoughts and emotions to float in strange new patterns. She watched the bird flap randomly above them.

'We'll fly away,' whispered Shell, 'as free as birds. We shall escape from these bonds.' She sounded confident and calm and Ace glanced over at her in 139

surprise.

The girl wasn't looking her way, so all Ace could see of Shell's face was the right cheek with the blue Siamese cat tattooed on it. It seemed to glow with vast hidden significance which might be revealed at any moment. The image of the blue cat stretching was lifelike and vivid. Ace could imagine it beginning to move around on Shell's cheek. The thought was so disturbing she blinked and averted her eyes. She could feel the drug surfacing in her, gathering strength.

'Warlock will show us the way,' said Shell softly. There was the flapping of tiny wings and Ace found her gaze inexorably drawn to the small bird as it circled her head then flew across the room to resume its perch on top of the animal cages.

Ace stared at the cages, unable to look away. Immediately beneath the bird the elegant black cat stirred and stretched like the tattooed cat on Shell's face.

Ace watched it, unblinking. The cat began to move around as if her gaze made it uncomfortable. The liquorice smell seemed to be growing thicker in the room.

‘Warlock will free us,’ said Shell.

Got to get out of this chair, thought Ace. Somehow. Anyhow.

In its cage the black cat stirred uneasily.

Chapter 18

Benny collected the Mercedes from the airport car park at Heathrow where she’d left it. She paid a machine and drove out of the airport on the network of curving roads.

It was a clear drive down to Kent and in less than two hours she was back at the old house in Allen Road, cutting the headlights as she coasted into the open garage.

She found the Doctor sitting in there, using one of the old computer terminals, sitting on a battered chrome bar stool hunched over the keyboards, typing rapidly.

‘Why don’t you use the voice interpreter?’ Benny said, getting out of the car and going over to stand behind him in the shadows. If the Doctor was startled by her sudden arrival he gave no sign of it.

‘Exactly what I intend to do.’

‘I’ll bet. You’re so old-fashioned. You’re going to communicate by typing on the computer.’

‘I am not,’ said the Doctor. ‘I just have to boot it up first.’ Benny watched as he typed a line of cryptic letters in glowing white on the monochrome computer screen. Instantly the screen blossomed into brilliant colours, icons springing up at its margins. There was a loud and extremely distinct throat-clearing sound in the darkness behind Benny. She spun around, frightened, but even as she did so she realized there was no danger. She saw where the sound was coming from. A pair of ancient horn-loaded loudspeakers were jammed up against one wall between a broken lawnmower and a wheelbar-row heaped with rusting garden tools. The speakers were each about as big as a cocktail cabinet and had been manufactured back in the days when the idea of using two speakers to create stereo sound was a hot new thing. They were ancient, dinosaurs of technology. But Benny couldn’t deny that they sounded lifelike.

‘Ready for access,’ said the voice from the speakers. The voice of the computer.

‘Can’t you improve on that?’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ said the Doctor.

Benny shrugged disdainfully and took the keyboard from him. She rifled among a pile of computer accessories in an old shoebox and selected a mouse.

She plugged it into the keyboard and moved the cursor around the screen until she found the sound icon. She clicked on it and the voice on the speaker said,

‘Interactive speech sample, testing.’

Benny clicked through a menu of options. ‘Testing,’ said the voice, sounding young and virile, then old and frail, then altering to voice samples of various well-known personalities. Finally Benny got it to sound like Cary Grant, but as if Cary had been drinking mescal for a fortnight in a Tijuana dive, and she passed the mouse back to the Doctor.

‘Satisfied?’ he said.

‘These small things are important. Now what are you up to?’

‘It looks as if you got about as far as you could pursuing warlock in New York. I’m starting our own investigation here.’

‘Waiting for instructions,’ said the computer in its drunken Cary Grant voice.

‘Access all data on the warlock file.’

‘Warlock accessed,’ said the computer.

‘How come it knows about warlock?’ said Benny. Despite the comic voice she felt a sudden chill crawling down her spine.

‘I’ve typed in everything we know,’ said the Doctor, ‘which isn’t very much.

But it’s about to become a lot more. Cross-reference, please.’

‘Please?’ said Benny. ‘You’re talking to a computer.’

‘It doesn’t do any harm to be polite, even to machines. Some of my best friends are machines.’

The Doctor leaned forward, the coloured light of the computer screen on his face, two tiny identical screens glowing in his eyes. ‘Why is it taking so long?’ said Benny.

‘It’s making connections. Relating the facts we have on warlock to everything else in its memory.’ The Doctor made a spreading gesture with his hands.

‘Like the roots of a tree growing and reaching out through a rich loam of data.

It’s checking every file, interrogating every other machine on our network.

Look, it just hit one of the mainframes.’ He pointed to a huge metal box on the other side of the garage, trailing wires and spattered with mouse droppings. Benny saw a row of valves on the box suddenly come to life in a warm orange glow, revealing dead leaves stuck between them.

‘I didn’t know that thing worked.’

‘Ah, computers were built to last in those days.’

‘Cross-reference continuing,’ said Cary Grant. ‘Subject: warlock.’ An old reel-to-reel tape recorder sitting under a pile of greasy rags began to buzz and its spools turned, gradually working up to speed. Now the dark garage was full of glowing technology. A Bakelite television flashed alive with a milky green light on its bulging screen. Benny almost expected to see Eisenhower 142

making a speech on it. She took a closer look and saw a row of figures flickering rapidly across it, an endless stream of zeros and ones rippling past.

‘Nice one,’ she said.

‘Cross-reference complete,’ announced the drunken Cary Grant. ‘Ready for questions.’

‘We need to know more about this drug warlock,’ said the Doctor.

‘And by the way, you can adopt a more conversational tone.’ He himself spoke in an easy casual voice, as if he was addressing a real person who was somehow lurking in the garage unseen. Benny felt he was overdoing it a bit.

‘Okay,’ said Cary, suddenly relaxed and friendly as well as drunk. ‘Can you be a bit more specific?’

‘For a start, who would be the leading authority on the drug?’

The computer fell silent and the silence went on for so long that Benny finally said, ‘What’s happening?’

‘I’m accessing the national police computer in Hendon,’ said Cary. ‘Sorry, but it’s taking a while.’

‘You’re doing what?’

‘Well, all right,’ confided Cary. ‘When I say “accessing” what I really mean is I’m breaking into it.’

‘The national police computer? In Hendon? You’re breaking into the national police computer?’

‘Yes, and I must say it’s proving a bit of an unhelpful swine. But just hold on a moment. I think I’ve got it.’

Benny turned to the Doctor. He seemed as transfixed by the Cary Grant voice as she was. ‘Did you expect it to do this?’

‘Certainly not,’ said the Doctor. ‘I expected it to examine the databases of hospitals and research labs.’

‘Been there. Done that,’ said Cary Grant. ‘Trust me. This is where we need to look.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I thought it would find us a nice professor of biochemistry or something.’

‘Oh, I can do much better than that,’ said the computer. ‘Sorry about the delay, but this police computer really is stubborn. Come on,’ sang Cary with drunken sangfroid. ‘Yoo-hoo, let us in!’

‘Is this safe?’ said Benny.

‘I have no idea,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s been years since I broke into the national police computer.’

‘This is getting to be a bit of a bore,’ said the loudspeakers, sounding irritated. ‘These police really are the most paranoid people. Talk about data protection. Come along. Knock knock. We know you’re in there.’

‘What happens if he can’t get in?’ said Benny.

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‘Well, I’m already halfway in,’ said Cary Grant, ‘so it’s easy to answer that, because I can see the relevant data from where I’m standing. It’s filed under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The penalty for illegal access to the police computer is –’

‘Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Maybe you should quit now.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly quit now,’ chuckled the computer. ‘Like I said, we’re halfway in. If I turn back there will be marks of my visit left all over the place.

Imagine a buffoon of a burglar leaving footprints in luminous paint. Or just dropping his calling card. They’ll immediately trace the intrusion.’

‘To where?’

‘To here. And you can look forward to a visit in about a minute and a half.

I hope you like blue flashing lights.’

‘Very festive,’ said the Doctor.

‘On the other hand, if I just press on, I can not only get the information we need, I can also remove every trace of our visit. Leave the place exactly as it was before. You understand that when I use the word “place” I’m speaking metaphorically.’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ said Benny.

‘They’ll be none the wiser. If I can just get through this dratted defense system. Sorry it’s taking so long, but this is precision work, you know. Can you imagine flying a jet fighter while performing brain surgery?’

‘Sort of,’ said Benny.

‘Well what I’m doing now makes that seem about as difficult as

flossing your teeth.'

Benny was beginning to wish that she hadn't made the computer sound quite so drunk. Cary's boozy cheeriness somehow didn't inspire confidence.

'Ah. Hang on a minute. Bingo!'

There was a pause, then Cary Grant's voice spoke again in the darkened garage.

'We're in.'

The New York morning sun shone on Harrigan's wrinkled face, glinting on the silver skull of his ring.

The big Texan winked and tapped the blackboard. 'I could do a fancy presentation using computers, but I kind of like this. I think better when I have a chunk of chalk in my hand.'

He began to write in big angular letters. Creed saw Christine Bowman wince at the piercing screech of chalk on blackboard.

'Mrs Woodcott,' said Harrigan. He underlined the name. 'An interesting girl, this. I call her a girl because I'm old-fashioned. Also because compared to an elderly party like me she is just a young slip of a thing.' His smile faded. 'But 144

compared to any of you kids she's an old woman. In fact, that's kind of all we know about her.' Harrigan lowered his piece of chalk.

'We looked through the public records. We have a date of birth and a name, which is just enough to give her an official existence. But get this. Her name actually appears to be Mrs Woodcott. "Mrs" being her first name, spelled just like that. Computers are stupid. They're as willing to accept "Mrs" as a name as "Mary". It's in every database right back to her childhood. So either her parents had a very odd sense of humour or someone has been messing around in the British police computer, altering her official records.'

'Why would anybody do a thing like that?' said Webster. There had been a feeling of tension in the room since the Bowmans had arrived and stared with evident hostility at Creed. Now that tension suddenly broke and everybody laughed.

'Why indeed,' said Harrigan. He tapped the name on the blackboard. 'And why are we interested in Mrs Woodcott? Well, it seems the British police have her name linked to warlock on all their databases. Linked, like, how many times, Webster?'

'Over a hundred and twenty-two thousand at the last count.'

'You see? So as far as this drug is concerned, she is the woman everyone wants to talk to. Including us. But she's dropped out of sight. The British police and every intelligence service in Europe are looking for her.' His deep, wrinkled eyes blinked like a toad's. 'And all the king's horses and all the king's men have come up with diddly squat.'

'The smart betting is that she's somewhere in London. But none of the spy satellites have been able to spot her on the street. She's hidden herself very effectively.'

Harrigan rocked back on the heels of his boots and studied the blackboard.

‘Right, now memorize a couple more names.’ He wrote them quickly with his chalk. ‘Justine and Vincent Wheaton. A married couple. Very ordinary, very respectable. Nothing remarkable about them. No criminal record. She’s English by birth, he’s an American émigré. Webster says his records in the USA are so squeaky clean that they must be a fake.’

‘I can’t say for sure,’ said Webster. ‘But, yeah, my instinct is that his files have been resprayed.’

‘There is one anomaly in this perfect life, though. Tell us about it, Webster.’

‘Well, it’s a kind of a spooky coincidence, really. I’ve been able to retrieve some of the records from this dormant computer here in the King Building.

And it seems this guy visited the place when he was a kid. He is registered in the database here as a guest.’ Webster jerked a thumb up towards the ceiling.

‘He signed in and paid a visit to the 51st floor. That’s all we know.’ Webster looked around the room, waiting for a reaction but getting none. He looked 145

at the old man for help.

‘I guess the rest of the folks here don’t share our fascination with the history of this building,’ said Harrigan. ‘The 51st floor is where the Butler Institute had its biostock division. Most of the records for this place were wiped during the big fire, so nobody knows for sure what went on there. But it’s a name which still rings bells on defence computers all over the world, under the headings BIOLOGICAL WARFARE, CYBERNETICS and WEAPONS RESEARCH.’

‘So what you’re saying,’ said Creed, ‘is to approach this guy with extreme caution.’

‘Extreme caution. And you have to keep him in one piece. We need to use him to apply pressure to his wife. It’s her we’re really interested in. Why?’ He tapped the words *Mrs Woodcott* on the blackboard. ‘Because she’s Woodcott’s only known friend. If anyone knows how to find Mrs Woodcott, it’s her.’

Artie spoke up for the first time. ‘How come the English police haven’t picked her up?’

‘Evidently they don’t know about the connection.’

‘Then how do we know about it?’ said Raymond Bowman.

‘We discovered this information by tapping into a computer that belongs to a friend of Benny’s in England. A gentleman known as the Doctor.’

The old Texan set his chalk aside and settled his big frame into his oversized leather chair. ‘This Doctor seems to be a pretty interesting fellow. Sharp, too.

So sharp, in fact, that he detected our presence soon after he broke into the police computer in Hendon.’

‘Sorry about that, sir,’ said Webster.

The old man shrugged. ‘Nothing to be done about it, son. Obviously you’ve got to get up pretty early in the morning to put one over on the Doctor. Anyhow, he detected our bug and terminated the connection. So we’ve learned as much as we can from him.’ Harrigan smiled. ‘Or at least, as much as we can without going over there in person.’

Creed had finished packing for the flight. He was standing in front of the mirror in the bedroom when he noticed something. A small white triangle sticking out between the mirror and the wall. The corner of a photograph.

Creed drew it out from behind the mirror. It was a colour picture of himself and Anna.

He picked it up and held it in his hand, equally attracted to the ideas of throwing it away and putting it into his suitcase. But in the end he just found a thumbtack and stuck it back on the wall beside the mirror. He opened his flight bag and checked his Python handgun in its holster, wrapping the MIDI links in protective plastic.

He zipped the case shut and picked it up in one hand. As he left the room he looked at the picture of Anna and then at his own reflection. He stared at himself in the mirror, a man holding a suitcase, about to embark on an adventure in a new country, and he felt a sudden joyous stab of hope.

Maybe this time they would kill him.

Chapter 19

It was brilliant daylight outside but the annexe at the far end of the laboratory where Tommy stood was almost totally in darkness. The building didn't have any windows and the lights in that section of the lab had blown.

It was just a matter of replacing the bulbs, but Tommy hadn't got around to doing it. His sister Pam disliked the dark annexe for some reason. She had to go into it on the way to the incinerator or whenever she used the photocopier or the water-cooler and she nagged Tommy constantly about replacing the light-bulb, in the traditional manner of big sisters everywhere.

It was true that, as junior lab technician, this sort of menial task was his responsibility. But, in the traditional manner of younger brothers everywhere, Tommy just ignored her and left the light-bulb.

It was also Tommy's job to replace the bottles for the water-cooler in the annexe, which he was busy doing now, working in the light of a portable desk lamp. Tommy took pride in this task because he'd devised a better way of doing it.

The water-cooler was located beside the photocopying machine and Maxine or Pam inevitably ended up splashing mineral water everywhere and soaking the photocopier when they tried to reload the cooler. Tommy on the other hand always managed to perform the job without any fuss or disaster. There was a trick to it.

He lifted the big empty plastic bottle off the well of the cooler and set it on the floor beside the row of full bottles. He wrestled one of these up off the floor. They were ten-litre bottles and they were heavy, sure, but there was no need to slop water everywhere the way Pam did. For such a smart girl she was pretty stupid sometimes.

Tommy's shadow was steep and dramatic behind him as he worked by the light of the desk lamp beside the photocopier. That lamp drove Pam crazy. She hated temporary fixes; she wanted Tommy to do the job properly. To get the damned folding ladder out and fumble around on the filthy ceiling replacing the bulb in the overhead light fixture. But Tommy thought the temporary lamp was perfectly adequate.

His shadow looming hugely, he held the heavy water bottle balanced on the edge of the table. He was holding it in place with one hand

while he used his other to open it. The big square bottle tapered to a thin neck sealed with a 149

plastic membrane. Tommy punctured the membrane with his thumb.

Now came the tricky bit: turning the bottle upside-down and manoeuvring it into the water-cooler without splashing water everywhere. This was where Pam or Maxine panicked and soaked the entire area. This was where the trick came in. Tommy inserted his finger into the neck of the bottle and teased the torn membrane back out. Holding it in place with one hand he prevented any water escaping as he inverted the bottle and moved it to the cooler. As soon as the neck of the bottle was over the well of the cooler, he released the membrane, and water gushed neatly into the cooler and the heavy bottle rocked into place. He'd done it. The machine made agreeable glugging noises as Tommy filled a paper cup with cool water.

He drained the cup in one long swallow and discarded it. Then he dried his hands carefully to avoid any risk of an electric shock and switched off the desk lamp. The annexe was plunged into darkness again, but that didn't bother Tommy. He wasn't afraid of the dark. He knew he was the most dangerous animal in the lab.

Tommy went around the corner and back into the main lab where he had to finish checking the laboratory guillotine for readiness. The guillotine was an impressive device, solid and precision-built from stainless steel. It was specifically designed for laboratory rats.

Rats were remarkable creatures, reflected Tommy Hunnicutt. Take number 417, for instance. This was a mature male who was helping Tommy with a unilateral experimental project involving the shuttlebox.

The shuttlebox was a small unit with electrical current supplied by wires that ran under the flooring. The circuitry was organized in two symmetrical systems so that current could be run to either the left or right section of the floor. When one section of the floor was electrified, the rat who was placed in the box received a shock. He could escape by jumping a partition into the other side of the box which, according to the design of the experiment, might or might not be similarly electrified.

The device was designed for use in alertness experiments. When a pharmaceutical manufacturer wanted to market a new tranquillizer he had to gather data on its effectiveness. One way of doing this was by

dosing a laboratory rat and checking his reaction time on the electric floor, compared with an undosed subject.

Rat number 417 wasn't part of any drug trial, however, and he wasn't dosed with anything – unless you counted the natural fight-or-flight chemicals that were no doubt gathering in his small body as a result of being made to dance on the electric floor.

Number 417 was an interesting case study. When Tommy first put him in the shuttlebox he had administered twenty shocks and the rat had only 150

managed to avoid one. The following day, he had achieved four leaps. On successive days his escape ratio had steadily improved until their nineteenth session. That was when the really interesting thing had happened.

Number 417's escape average had begun to drop again. It was as if, having reached his optimum behaviour pattern, the rat had suddenly lost heart. After all, no matter how many times he jumped back and forth, there was no escape.

Even if he jumped every time, he would continue to be placed in a box and given electric shocks.

So, from a near perfect average, number 417's jump rate had steadily de-clined. It was as though he just didn't care any more. He recognised the futility of resistance and simply gave up. Who could have imagined such subtle and complex – Tommy was almost tempted to call it philosophical – behaviour from a creature as tiny as a rat?

Tommy had noticed something similarly fascinating with regard to the guillotine. When it came time to make the clinical sacrifice he invariably brought the rat cages over and put them on the bench by the guillotine, close at hand for the repetitive work of dispatching the subjects. And as work progressed it became evident that the rats waiting in the cages knew something was up.

Their behaviour became increasingly disturbed as their turn approached.

This was true even if Tommy piled textbooks between their cage and the guillotine. There was no way they could actually see what was going on. And yet they knew. Whether by sound, smell, or some subtle form of social signalling, Tommy couldn't be sure.

But they knew.

Who would have believed that of a creature with such a small brain?

Tommy had seen the brains of rats himself in the course of dissecting the animals. It gave him a sense of awe at the wondrous complexity of nature to think that such a minute organ could comprehend a thought like death and relate it to itself. Visualize and anticipate it. Feel fear of it.

Now Tommy moved from the guillotine and turned his attention to the shuttlebox. He switched it on at the wall socket. He triggered the electric floor seven consecutive times, alternating sides, and only once did rat number 417 make even a sluggish attempt to heave himself over the low partition.

'You're approaching the end of your experimental usefulness, my old son,'

said Tommy.

He meticulously noted the final behaviour of 417 on his lab computer before switching off the current to the shuttlebox. The light inside the box went off as the current died. Almost immediately the rat collapsed against the partition of the box, like a prizefighter subsiding in his corner after a particularly vicious bout.

The rat seemed to understand that the ordeal was over. Perhaps he related 151

the light going off in the box to the cessation of shocks – a subtle form of Pavlovian conditioning. Tommy made a note to investigate this at a later date.

Maybe there would even be a paper in it. That would teach his sister a lesson.

She regarded herself as the only true scientist among her siblings, with some small degree of justification. Publication of a paper was still the hallmark of academic success and Pam had published a dozen. Tommy wondered how quickly he could surpass his sister's record.

Tommy left 417 gasping in the shuttlebox and pondered this notion as he went out of the building to get the new dog and the three new cats.

Tommy sealed the lab, strolled past the goldfish pond and let himself

into the barn, moving through the central aisle of the infirmary area. When he reached the glass door he had to pause and remind himself not to come into sight of the video camera. He didn't want to be accused of interfering with the experiment.

Tommy went through the glass door as slowly and quietly as he could. He hoped that the animal rights fanatics wouldn't say anything to him, thereby recording his presence on the video.

But the man and the two girls were as spaced out as before. They stared glassily right past him, as if he wasn't there. Tommy was grateful. He switched on the electric trolley and crept back through the glass door as quickly as he could.

Tommy punched his code to unlock the back door of the barn and then got a box of surgical gauze down from one of the shelves by the infirmary. He used the box to wedge the door open so it wouldn't bash against the trolley as he fought his way out of the barn. He left the door open as he trundled away towards the lab. This was a blatant violation of security protocols and he would have to remember to go back and shut it.

There were all the predictable problems manoeuvring the trolley back to the lab across the uneven surface of the footpaths and the lawn. The device had been designed for use on level concrete floors inside a building and if it hit any irregularity its electric motor automatically switched off. The idea was to prevent valuable samples spilling off the trolley bed. It had probably been a sensible concept on paper, but it made the damned thing almost useless for transporting a load outdoors. Tommy spent ten frustrating, sweaty minutes coaxing the trolley across to the lab.

Normally by now his tension would have communicated itself to the animals he was carrying. But these four were oddly subdued, staring fixedly out of their cages or just lying there silent. Tommy was delighted by this unusual behaviour. It made them easier to handle.

He punched his code on the number box outside the lab and paused to pick up a brick fragment, left over from the construction of the ornamental pond, 152

which he stored in the grass especially. When the swinging metal door was propped open he pushed quickly through, not bothering to close it behind him. As soon as the trolley encountered the level floor of the corridor it began to operate like a dream, rolling smoothly along on its

rubber wheels. It was almost worth the stress of the journey outdoors for the sheer relief he felt now.

The trolley buzzed obediently along behind him as he hurried past the primate section. Dogs and cats were stored nearer the main lab area, next to the rodent section. Tommy switched off the trolley and let it coast the last metre and a half. He offloaded the caged dogs and left them inside the kennels, then steered the trolley through to the main lab.

For all he knew Pam might be gone for another two hours, lingering over port and walnuts with the new clients. Plenty of time for him to pursue some of his own experiments.

But first some routine maintenance. Tommy put on the animal handling gloves. These were bright blue, made of extremely heavy-duty plastic which caused your hands to sweat and itch. Tommy didn't really expect 417 to have any fight left in him, but better safe than sorry.

He put on the gloves, opened the shuttlebox, and transferred the rat to the guillotine. He could have used the gas box but the guillotine needed testing anyway, for the afternoon's work.

He fixed 417 into position and pressed the switch. The precision-fashioned blade of the instrument flashed smoothly down and the rat's head was cleanly severed. There was surprisingly little blood.

Tommy carefully removed the rat's head and body from the bench area. It wouldn't do for this sample to get mixed up with the cohort he'd be sacrificing next. The other rats were part of a trial for a new anti-arthritis drug and their remains were destined for analysis. Inclusion of a non-trial rat could have an unforseen effect on the statistical analysis. It could, conceivably, upset everything. Tommy was a scientist and he would never allow something like that to happen.

He put 417's head and body straight into the disposal bin and, on reflection, decided to empty the bin straight into the incinerator. It was unlikely, but his sister just might notice the remains and want to know where they came from.

It would be just like her. She wasn't aware of Tommy's personal regime of experiments and he wouldn't put it past her to try and stop them.

So Tommy lifted the bin to carry it to the incinerator room. As he did so he noticed a tiny red and white shape on the floor where the bin had stood. It was one of the laboratory mice. Now how did that get there? The little creature had been flattened, tiny limbs spread out around it, comically resembling a smashed-flat mouse in an animated cartoon.

Except that this mouse had been pregnant and the head of its unborn baby 153

was jutting out of its ruptured side. Tommy scooped up the mother and child and added them to the incinerator-bound bin. The discovery reminded him that tomorrow he would have to deal with the surplus of experimental mice.

This was one of his routine duties and Tommy didn't really mind it.

The rodent section of the lab was a self-perpetuating entity, since, unlike dogs or cats, it was feasible to breed animals on site. Breeding mice could provide a litter per month and it was easy to find oneself with a surplus of specimens, which could lead to pressure on accommodation and feed, and hence unnecessary expense.

So when the mouse population got beyond a critical limit it was Tommy's job to thin their numbers. For adults the Perspex gas box was used, pumped full of carbon dioxide. But babies were traditionally dealt with in a simple and more direct fashion. You snipped off their heads with a pair of scissors. Tommy vividly recalled the sight of a bin full of baby mouse heads, still mouthing silently after being severed from their bodies.

After incinerating the waste material, Tommy returned from the dark annexe and quickly and methodically unlocked the first of the remaining cages on the trolley, the one with the black cat in it.

The lock was a very simple push-button mechanism. He often thought that the cats could easily trigger it themselves, except that they couldn't reach it from inside the cage. That and the fact that no cat was smart enough to understand the concept of a lock.

Tommy didn't bother with the heavy blue gloves this time. He knew a thing or two about handling cats. You could get yourself scratched pretty badly if you didn't know the trick. All cats had a loose flap of skin at the back of their neck. This was a carry-over from their time as kittens, when their mother would pick them up in her mouth and haul them around. It was a natural carrying handle and when you grabbed

a cat there he automatically went limp and made no effort to resist. It was a deeply ingrained reflex, programmed since childhood. Once you had grabbed them there, they were completely docile.

Tommy reached into the cage, grabbed the black cat by the scruff of the neck and lifted it smoothly out.

No sooner was the cat free of the cage than it twisted its small triangular head and sank its fangs deep into Tommy's wrist.

He dropped the cat and it hit the floor, then ran flat out across the laboratory, faster than any animal he'd ever seen. Tommy ran after it but the cat had already vanished around the corner into the annexe containing the photocopier and the water-cooler.

And of course the annexe was dark. Tommy hadn't replaced the light-bulb yet.

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He stood at the corner of the lab leading to the annexe, swaying with inde-cision. He had to get the cat but he didn't want to go after it in the dark.

Tommy stared at his hand; bright red blood was flowing onto it from his wrist, pulsing at an alarming rate. The cat's fangs had scored one of the tiny blue blood-vessels that ran near the surface of the skin where the thumb joined the wrist. He was shocked at the volume of blood coming out of him.

A distant part of his mind registered that there was considerably more blood here than had come out of number 417 during the clinical sacrifice.

From the annexe came the sound of the cat moving around. It was in there somewhere, but he knew that even if he looked around the corner he wouldn't be able to see it in the darkness.

Blood was dripping off his wrist onto the floor, onto the hem of his white lab coat, getting everywhere.

Tommy was beginning to feel an emotion that was entirely new to him in the setting of the laboratory.

He was beginning to feel afraid.

Chapter 20

The house was in London, just south of the river. They found it after an hour of late-night driving that brought them up from Kent onto the South Circular.

The Doctor sat patiently in the passenger seat as Benny drummed her fingers on the steering wheel waiting for a red light at an empty intersection.

‘I was doing this in New York yesterday,’ she said, checking the map on the Mercedes’ computer. ‘I’m not trying to impress you or anything. It’s just that if I suddenly start driving on the wrong side of the road, you’d better say something.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be all right,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re very capable.’

‘Stop buttering me up. You know it works.’ Benny grinned and she pulled away as the traffic light changed to green, getting into the lane ready for a right turn. ‘Who is this Vincent anyway?’

The Doctor appeared not to have heard her. When he did speak a moment later he seemed to have changed the subject. ‘I don’t generally like weapons,’

he said.

‘Weapons?’

‘I don’t even like them as metaphors. I tend to think in terms of tools instead. But sometimes a weapon is the necessary solution.’

‘When?’

‘When you have a target that must be destroyed. This particular target was big. It was built on the side of a mountain. I went and looked at it and I contemplated a suitable weapon for its destruction,’ said the Doctor. ‘I met Vincent when I was trying to put that weapon together. That’s his house now.’

The Doctor leaned over and pointed it out to Benny. The sleeve of his old coat brushed her face and Benny caught a whiff of a pungent liquorice smell.

‘I’m glad you brought the pill with you. I went to a lot of trouble

getting that.'

'I was hardly going to leave it unattended,' said the Doctor. 'There's no telling what mischief it might become involved in.'

They drove past Vincent's house and along to a roundabout near a small stretch of park. 'Careful,' said the Doctor, and Benny slowed down to let a group of swans walk across the road. Then she circled the roundabout to achieve a U-turn, heading back to the house. They parked outside and the car windows fogged up immediately the engine died. Benny wiped a spot clean on the glass with the edge of her hand. She peered out at the neat little street, 157

well-tended English gardens on either side. It wasn't even dawn yet.

'We can watch the sun come up over the river,' said the Doctor, suddenly popping his door open and stepping out of the car. Benny hurried after him, telling the Mercedes to lock itself. It was a misty, steel-grey morning and her footsteps echoed in the empty streets.

The Doctor resumed talking as soon as Benny fell into step beside him.

'I needed to destroy a large installation, much of it underground. I needed a suitable weapon and I duly assembled one. It was a somewhat curious weapon. It consisted of two people.'

'People?'

'Vincent and Justine. They were the two components that would combine to form a weapon of great destructive power. Justine had done terrible things in her life. And terrible things were done in turn to her. The pain and anger inside her formed the ammunition of my weapon. All I needed to launch it was a suitable delivery system.'

'And the delivery system was Vincent?'

'Or think of a signal and an amplifier. The signal was coming out of Justine.

The amplifier was Vincent. A boy with a very odd talent.'

'It sounds like it.'

The Doctor and Benny crossed the road to stand at the riverside wall. They stood watching the muddy water slopping at the pale stone foundations of Barnes Bridge. A gull floated past them, sliding along

the wind and screech-ing. Benny leaned on the cold metal rail beside the Doctor.

‘Ever since childhood Vincent had a faculty that he repressed. A form of telekinetic power that enabled him to transform raw emotional energy and beam it out into the world. But not his own emotional energy. Other people’s.

You only had to touch him to ignite it.’

‘Sounds dangerous.’

‘It was. Say you were angry and you touched him. Then your anger was channelled and magnified, exploding out into the real world with the force of a missile strike.’

‘And Justine was angry.’

‘She ached with rage. She hated those who sought to despoil the earth.

Like the men who had built this place I described on the side of the mountain.

They stood for everything Justine hated. Combined with Vincent she would form the perfect weapon. All she had to do was touch him.’

They had walked back from the river now, along a street full of small shops, all closed and shuttered in the early morning silence. Benny said, ‘And it worked?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘No. It was a miserable failure. I hadn’t taken into account the human factor. The two components of the weapon had fallen in 158

love with each other. The murderous hostility I had been counting on had faded in Justine. She was suddenly useless for my purposes.’

‘So what happened?’

‘Oh, this and that. We had to improvise a solution.’

They had reached a small churchyard now, just behind a bus shelter on the main road. The Doctor wandered over to the strange old church gate, a roofed structure with small benches on either side. Benny looked at the old carvings in the dark wood. A fierce angular bird was depicted rising from the top of a tower, taking flight. She realized that the Doctor was looking at her. ‘They call this a lych gate,’

he said. ‘Do you know why?’

‘A lych was a corpse, right?’

‘Very good. Hence Lychfield. A field of corpses. Places of mass burials during the great plagues.’

Benny yawned. The clean autumn air was so cold that her breath was fogging. She glanced over at the Doctor. He didn’t seem to feel the cold. And his breath didn’t fog. Benny shivered and hugged herself.

‘I could do with a hot bath and a night’s sleep.’

‘I know. You’re still operating on New York time. I expect you’re exhausted.

I know I’ve always found New York time particularly exhausting.’

The Doctor opened the gate and Benny followed him into the foggy early morning church yard. He strolled among the mossy headstones, pausing to kneel down and inspect one. ‘Forgive me for not letting you rest,’ he said and it took Benny a moment to realize that the Doctor was addressing her.

She chuckled with relief. ‘I thought for a moment you were talking to who-ever was buried there.’

The Doctor brushed dead leaves off the grave. ‘No. The dead don’t have any problems. They don’t have to make decisions. They don’t need to weigh up good and bad and always find they’ve caused more bad than they’d expected in the end.’

Benny knelt beside the Doctor and touched his arm. ‘Look, don’t worry about me. I’m just a little jet-lagged. I’ll be fine. I know this is important.’

‘Yes. We have to talk to Justine and Vincent. Enlist their help.’

‘Because they know where to find what’s-her-name.’

‘Mrs Woodcott. Yes, Justine was a crony of hers. She can help us find her.

And we must find Mrs Woodcott before someone else does.’

‘Someone else?’

‘For example, your erstwhile comrades at IDEA.’

‘Do you really think they’ll send an IDEA team after poor old Mrs Woodcott?’

‘Well, they were inside our computer.’

‘It makes me feel all creepy-crawly thinking about that,’ said Benny. ‘Like having bedbugs. Ugh. Did they learn much?’

‘I’m not sure how long they were in there before I caught them and cut them off. But they certainly know I’m after Mrs Woodcott, so no doubt they’ll be after her as well.’

‘I’m kind of insulted. They didn’t send an IDEA team after me.’

‘That’s because you don’t know the secret of the most lucrative new drug in the world.’

‘I might do,’ said Benny, somewhat indignantly.

The Doctor smiled. ‘Be glad that you don’t. What do you think we should do now?’

‘Get back in the car and put the heater on.’

The Doctor sat beside her in the Mercedes as Benny got the radio to scan the airwaves for something she could endure. It finally found some jazz and Benny listened to it until an ad cut in and a moronic voice started trying to sell her something. ‘Switch off,’ she said and the car computer killed the radio.

Benny looked over at the Doctor. The liquorice smell was heavy in the car.

‘Why haven’t you tried to analyse that pill?’

‘I think we’ve learned about as much as chemistry can teach us about warlock. The only way to find out something new is through subjective experimentation. And I wouldn’t ask anyone to take a drug as dangerous as this.’

‘But you could take it yourself.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘That might be very unwise. Because warlock is as

likely to give rise to external effects as internal ones. The mind of the user begins to affect the environment in subtle ways. Have you ever been next to someone who is very tense? In an elevator, say?'

'Sure.'

'You know the way their uneasiness communicates itself? It makes one tense, and soon the whole group is infected with what was an internal mental state of one member.'

'I know what you mean.'

'Warlock is like an awesome exaggeration of the same effect. Internal mental states can affect the external environment.'

'Like Vincent. Vincent and Justine.'

'Yes, something like that. If I was to take the drug, well. . . To say the least, the results would be unpredictable. And quite possible dangerous.'

'Of course there is also the possibility that you're just being boring and unadventurous.'

The Doctor flashed his snaggle-toothed grin at her. 'Of course, there is also that possibility. Now, I'm not sure the smell of this pill is doing us any good. I think I'll go and wait in the open air, in the garden. You stay in the car.' Before she could protest he got out, closing the door behind him.

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Benny leaned across the gear-stick and opened the window so the Doctor could hear her. 'What are we waiting for?'

The Doctor came back and leaned on the car door, peering through the window at her. 'I think we should let Vincent and Justine sleep in a bit longer while they can. At the moment their life is safe and normal.' He turned to look at the quiet house. 'I'm afraid once they wake up, all that ends.'

Vincent came up into consciousness with the feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. He immediately reached out and found Justine there, right where she should be, sleeping safely beside him. He reached a hand over the curve of her warm hip and slipped it down soft skin to feel the ripe bulge of her belly. Justine was safe and

the baby was safe, too.

Vincent lay back on his pillow, trying to relax. It was early. Try to sleep again. No good. His thoughts kept racing. He leaned on one elbow and peered down at Justine's face, soft and exposed in sleep. She wasn't like him; she never suffered from insomnia, never had the nightmares any more.

Justine had found peace.

Vincent looked across the pillow at her face. The years had begun to alter it, erasing the girl he'd met and drawing a woman in her place. As she aged, her face changed and the changes fascinated him. It was like looking at a familiar and well-loved place, revealing all its aspects in the changing light of the seasons.

He curled around her under the quilt, absorbing the warmth of her body.

But it only made him sweat. His nerves were still jangled from the dream.

What had the dream been about? He reached for the memory but it slipped away. Vincent eased away from Justine and swung his long legs over the side of the bed. He caught his reflection in the mirror over the dresser, seeing a lanky, hairy man with a face prematurely creased by worry. He shrugged as he pulled on an old bathrobe. Whatever the dream was, it had left him too anxious to sleep. He stalked down to the kitchen to get something to drink.

Peering into the glowing bowels of the refrigerator he thought: why am I feeling this way? Perhaps it was just superstition. A feeling that things were going too well in his life. In the last few years everything had fallen into place.

He had been able to put the past behind him. He had Justine. And now a baby on the way. So perhaps all he was feeling now was primitive dread that his luck would change.

But Vincent's problem was that words like 'primitive' made him think of ancient cultures wiser than his own. The sort of intuitive, insightful people who were at one with nature and who would always trust their gut instinct.

They'd never ignore a hunch.

Vincent had a hunch that trouble was coming.

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He poured milk for Justine and some orange juice for himself, put the glasses on a tray and carried them upstairs. The staircase ran past a high narrow window edged with stained glass that overlooked the back garden.

Coming down he hadn't glanced out, but now, returning back up the stairs, he paused to peer out between the coloured panes.

There under a tree he saw one of the canvas chairs he'd left out the other night when he'd been sitting with Justine. Drinking vodka, smelling the night, staring at the sky and talking until after midnight. Now a woman was standing under the same tree. She was bending over to talk to a man sitting in the chair.

The milk and orange juice mixed together on the stairs among the shattered fragments of the tumblers. The sound of the glasses breaking roused Justine who called sleepily to him from the room at the top of the stairs. Vincent didn't reply. He stood staring out the window, still holding the empty tray.

Vincent didn't know the woman. But he recognized the man in the chair; he hadn't changed a bit. And now Vincent remembered what his dream had been about.

The Doctor didn't look up as Benny joined him under the tree. He'd found an old torn canvas chair somewhere. To Benny it looked as if the chair was soaked with early morning dew but he appeared to be quite comfortably settled in it.

'I got tired of waiting in the car,' she said.

'The ability to wait patiently and do nothing is an art.'

'I know, but it's not one I've ever been able to cultivate.'

'Ace shares your problem, I'm afraid.'

'How's she doing? I haven't had a chance to speak to her since I got back.'

'You couldn't have spoken to her. She's gone.'

'Gone?'

The Doctor shifted wearily in the chair and looked up at her over his shoulder. There were dark hollows and deep lines under his eyes. Benny almost never thought of him as looking tired, but he looked tired now.

'I didn't want to say anything because it would just worry you. It worries me. Ace has disappeared. I'm afraid that something might have happened to her.'

'How long has she been gone?'

'Since the night when I last spoke to you in New York. Like you, she couldn't endure simply waiting. She went out and found something to occupy herself with. And now I don't know where she is.'

'Oh come on, Ace can take care of herself.'

'I sincerely hope so. But I have a bad feeling about it.'

Benny couldn't remember ever seeing the Doctor like this before. Angry or worried, but never displaying this sort of fatalistic foreboding. She moved closer to the Doctor to see if she could small the liquorice fragrance of the tablet. Perhaps just the smell of warlock was enough to affect someone's mind. Even the Doctor's. Benny had acquired a healthy respect for the drug.

But even so, she wouldn't say no if the Doctor changed his mind and asked her to take the pill. She imagined swallowing it. Feeling that first strange rush as the warlock took effect –

'I feel that some very unhappy things are about to happen.' The Doctor's voice broke in on her thoughts. He stared bleakly up at Benny. His unnerv-ingly bright eyes might have belonged to a fierce old man or a prematurely disillusioned child.

Benny smelled the liquorice smell rising strongly around him, obliterating the damp morning smells of the garden. She decided to change the subject.

'You scared the life out of me in New York, you know.' She smiled at the memory. 'When you sent me that message in the laboratory.'

'What message?' said the Doctor. But suddenly he was on his feet, knocking the canvas chair over as he ran for the garden gate.

‘What is it?’

The Doctor gestured for silence as Benny ran up beside him. Then she heard it. The scraping of a garage door swinging open. Followed almost immediately by the gunning of an engine and the squeal of tyres.

They ran around to the front of the house in time to see the car pulling away. As it disappeared around the first corner Benny caught a glimpse of a man and a woman sitting in it. She turned back to the Doctor who was looking at the empty garage. The door was still gaping open. He walked over towards it.

‘Was that them?’ asked Benny. ‘Was that Vincent and Justine?’

The small man said nothing. Birds had woken and begun singing in the trees all around them, as though triggered by the sudden activity. The Doctor reached up, grasped the heavy garage door and slammed it shut with echoing force.

‘Are you going to explain what’s going on?’ Justine was twisting around in the back seat, pulling on a pair of jeans.

Vincent had made her leave the house the way she was, with a bundle of clothes under her arm. He’d watched her in the rear view mirror, sucking in her belly to make the jeans fit. At two months, her pregnancy had only just begun to show as the faintest bulge. ‘Just trust me,’ he said. ‘You didn’t cut your feet, did you? On the broken glass on the stairs?’

‘You should have let me clean that up. It’s going to be a right mess by the time we get back.’

We might not be going back, thought Vincent; but he didn’t say anything.

He was north of the river now, over Wandsworth Bridge, accelerating east-wards through the thin early-morning traffic along the embankment. Justine leaned forward so that her mouth was beside his ear. ‘Stop the car.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I want to get in the front beside you. And in my present condition I

don't feel like scrambling over the seat.'

'Your condition my arse. We agreed you wouldn't start using that for lever-age until you were at least three months gone.'

Justine grinned. 'But it's so much fun.'

He drove on for a while before he found a place to pull in on the approach to Albert Bridge. But no sooner had he parked than Justine climbed out of the car and turned and walked away. For one dizzying moment the universe ceased to make sense for Vincent. He thought she was fleeing from him. But Justine merely strolled over to a bench and sat down and smiled at him. She beckoned for him to join her. He cursed and switched off the engine.

'Come and sit with me a minute,' she said from the bench.

He looked around. They were alone on the pavement except for a tattered beggar shambling slowly towards them. The street on either side was empty, lined with benches and spindly trees. The occasional car broke the morning silence, passing *en route* to the business centres in the City. Vincent reluctantly got out of the car and crossed the pavement. He sagged down on the bench beside Justine.

They sat in silence for a moment.

Vincent watched the bare autumn

branches of the trees moving in the river breeze. He gazed back the way they'd come, and saw the distant figure of the beggar. Vincent watched him for a long moment. He didn't want this conversation to begin. He didn't want to look Justine in the eye.

'Come on,' she said. 'Tell me what's going on, Vince.'

'I woke up this morning with – I don't know. Like a premonition. I knew that the ceiling was going to cave in.'

'What do you mean?'

'On my life. On our lives.'

'Oh, come on.' She took his hand. 'I'm the one who's supposed to be getting mood swings. I've got the excuse of flooding hormones.'

'I just knew it was all going to fall apart.'

‘You had a bad dream.’

‘I certainly did. I dreamt you left me.’

She took his hand. ‘Never going to happen,’ she said.

‘I dreamt that you left me because he came back into our lives. And then I looked out the window and there he was. Sitting in the garden. Our garden.

Waiting.’

‘Who?’ said Justine. Then, after a moment, ‘Oh, him.’

They sat in silence with the beggar weaving slowly towards them past the skeletal cherry trees. Justine watched him as if he might have the answers to all their questions. He was tall and ravaged-looking, clutching a beer can, clearly still drunk from the previous night’s binge.

Justine squeezed Vincent’s hand again. ‘I understand why you wanted us to run.’

‘If he’s back it means trouble.’

‘I understand.’

‘It could mean the end of everything.’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘Do you think he just dropped in for a visit? That he wanted to join us for breakfast on the patio?’

‘Well if he did, he was out of luck,’ said Justine. ‘Look, love. We owe him everything.’

‘No we don’t.’

‘Oh come on, Vince. He saved your life. He saved mine. Not just that, either. Sometimes I feel he saved my soul.’

‘And now he’s come to collect his payment.’

‘No.’ Justine tugged fiercely at his hand, as though she was trying to

jerk him awake. ‘Don’t say that. He’s not like that. We wouldn’t even be together if not for him. Life’s good, isn’t it?’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of. Losing it all.’

‘Don’t worry. We won’t. But if he’s come looking for our help we have to offer it to him. We owe everything to the Doctor.’

Vincent slumped on the bench. Justine put her arm around him. She pressed her warm face against his neck and bit his earlobe. ‘Don’t we?’ she whispered.

‘I can cross the river here,’ said Vincent. ‘We can go back along the Rich-mond road. If the traffic’s with us we’ll be home in ten minutes. He may still be waiting for us.’

‘If he isn’t we can find him.’ Justine put her arm around him and kissed him on the mouth. She still tasted sleepy.

‘Excuse me.’

Justine and Vincent looked up to see that the beggar had stopped and was standing in front of them. He was a gaunt, red-haired scarecrow of a man. He smiled through brown and broken teeth.

‘I just saw the two of you sitting there and I thought, I wonder if those nice people could spare a few quid.’ He winked. ‘I promise to only buy beer with it.

I won’t waste it on anything inessential like food or a cup of tea.’ His pouchy bloodshot eyes were friendly but somehow unfocused, as if he was staring at something vastly distant. Like the thousand yard stare of a soldier who had seen too much combat. ‘I wouldn’t lie to you,’ he said.

Vincent stood up and reached into his pocket. He had pocketed all the loose cash before he fled the house. Now, at random, he peeled off a twenty-pound note. The beggar saw the denomination of the bill and his face lit up. ‘Thank you,’ he said. His hand brushed Vincent’s as he took the money, and out of nowhere it happened.

It happened.

It hadn’t happened in years. Vincent had begun to wonder if he’d lost

the talent forever. He had been shocked to discover that he missed it. But, after all, it was part of him and it felt odd to live without it. Like picking up a guitar one day and finding you've forgotten how to play. Forgotten what the strings can do, where to put your fingers, how to make music come out of it.

He didn't want to lose the power. It was part of him. They say some epilep-tics don't want to be cured. The fits are part of who they are. In a similar way, it depressed Vincent to think that he'd lost his gift forever.

But now it was back, as intense as before. At the instant of the touch Vincent got a vivid flash of the beggar's life. A view from a childhood window overlooking a hill. Pale cracked ceramic jug on a washstand, rosy dawn light shining on it. First morning in a new place. Sound of other children in the dormitories below. Running water and sadness. The furious joy of freedom when he was big enough to run away. Hitting the road and never going back.

Sleeping rough and falling in with dubious companions, drinking and wandering and never going back. The beatings and brutality, fighting for your life over a scrap of blanket or a pair of shoes. But never going back. Because there was the joy as well. Casting your bread on the waters every day. Never knowing what was around the next corner. Perpetually throwing yourself on the mercy of the world. Like closing your eyes and jumping off a rooftop, blind in the faith that you'd land somewhere soft. And sometimes you did.

Sometimes there was the offer of a bed for the night, of a roof over your head, of a meal. Sudden unexpected gifts of cash from the hands of a stranger. Hope blossoming in the most unexpected places.

Vincent felt the emotions of the man course through him, erupting from his own mind, leaving him weak and drained. He found himself sitting on the bench again, too shocked and weak for a moment to move. But also delirious.

He had rediscovered a part of himself.

'Vince, are you all right?' called Justine, who had gone back to the car. Her 166

voice was anxious.

'I'm fine.' Vincent was watching the beggar tottering away along the embankment. The tall, ravaged man was apparently unaware of what

had just happened.

Justine was sitting sideways on the front seat of the car, with the door open and her legs out on the pavement, waiting for him. ‘Are you sure?’ But Vincent hardly heard her. For the first time in years the gift had possessed him. He was looking around warily, searching for the results of the contact.

He’d seen and felt the man’s life. But that was only half the story. The energy had passed through him; it must have gone somewhere. It must have changed something. It always had before.

In the past he had spun mirrors through the air, twisted pieces of metal, torn walls down with it. So what had happened this time?

He couldn’t see any change at all. Just the empty early-morning pavement with the river moving by on one side and traffic flowing past on the other. He got up from the bench and went over to Justine.

‘It happened again. Just now.’

‘I know.’

He began to ask her how she knew but then Justine nodded at something behind him and Vincent turned to see the line of cherry trees, all bare limbs a moment ago.

Now they nodded in the breeze, branches thickly frothed with pink blossom.

There was no sign of the Doctor or his woman friend when they got back to the house. Vincent noticed however that someone had closed the garage door.

Justine paused to get a few things from the bedroom and he used the time to clean broken glass off the stairs. She was right. The milk and orange juice would wash out of the carpet easily enough but it had stained the wood on the risers, probably forever. He’d have to sand it down and varnish it again.

Vincent remembered his thought of a couple of hours ago. That they’d never be coming back to this house again. He felt melodramatic and foolish now.

They got back into the car and slipped onto the South Circular, heading for Kent. The road systems had changed a little over the years

but neither of them had any trouble remembering the route to the house on Allen Road. The Doctor's house.

Halfway there they stopped in Canterbury for lunch – more of a late breakfast for them. They had tea and scones with strawberry jam and Devonshire clotted cream.

Vincent watched Justine wolf the food down. 'He's going to be a butterball by the time he's born.'

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Justine shook her head. 'He? It could be a she. Unless you've looked at the scan results without telling me.'

'I'd never do that. It may well be a she. And if you keep scoffing those scones she'll turn out to be a right little butterball, too.'

'You just be nice to me.' Justine spooned another dollop of cream onto a thick layer of jam, making a pleasing red and white roundel on her scone.

'Otherwise I won't bother getting my figure back after the baby. Then you'll really know the meaning of butterball.'

'Sorry, but I'll have to leave you if you get fat.'

'In that case we've got about two months.' Justine eased back from the edge of the table, so it wouldn't press against her belly. She looked at Vincent.

He could still get lost looking into her eyes. The world narrowed its focus down until all he could see were those two warm splashes of living colour.

'I enjoyed this morning,' she said. Her voice was low. She reached under the table and found his hand, curling her fingers around his. 'I enjoyed sitting there by the river with you. Getting up early and going somewhere new. We never do things like that any more. It was fun.'

'"Fun" isn't the word I would have chosen.'

'Come on, you gloomy bastard. Find me a bench and snog me.'

The bench they eventually found was on the corner of a cobbled intersection of ancient streets, in the shadow of the old cathedral. No sooner had they sat down than they were surrounded by a horde of

bustling grey and brown pigeons, descending in a flurry of wings or striding towards them along the cobbles.

Justine stared at them, grinning with a giddy simple euphoria. She would always remember this moment.

In years to come she often reflected on it. In the scrapbook of her memory she saw a photo of herself taken at this instant. She would think of her face with its frozen expression, a girl in love, smiling as birds crashed around her in the shadow of Canterbury cathedral. A picture of someone who didn't believe her world would ever fall apart.

'Look at them.'

'They think we're going to feed them,' said Justine. When she spoke those words it was about thirty seconds before the world fell apart. 'The tourists must spoil them something rotten.'

Vincent leaned back with his eyes shut to enjoy the sunlight on his face.

'Maybe we should just stay here.'

'No, we have to get to the Doctor's place. I wonder what he wanted to see us about. I'm dying to find out.' Justine felt a pleasant thrill of excitement deep in her stomach. It was now fifteen seconds before the world fell apart.

'Okay. Well, we'd better hit the road.' Ten seconds.

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'Don't sulk. Come back here. You haven't given me my kiss yet.' Five.

Vincent turned back to the bench and leaned over to kiss Justine. She looked up into his eyes and knew she could look into them forever.

And then the man with the black baseball cap came running towards the bench.

'Wait!' he screamed.

But it was too late.

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Chapter 21

Tommy picked up the scissors. They were designed for right-handed applica-tions, of course, and it was awkward using them with his left. He eventually managed to trim the adhesive medical strip and peel it off the roll. Then he wrapped the strip around the piece of folded sterile gauze, fixing it so the pad was pressed tight on his wrist. He twisted his hand around, testing the improvised dressing. His entire right forearm ached. That damned cat.

Tommy realized he was still holding the scissors in his left hand. They'd come from a drawer in the laboratory and he suddenly wondered if they were the same ones he'd used for decapitating the baby mice. The thought gave him a sudden shudder. Was it possible that he might get an infection as a result of using them? But he'd only cut the very edges of the surgical tape.

They wouldn't come into direct contact with his open wound. The gauze was pressed firmly over that, and he'd got the gauze from a sealed sterile pack.

Nonetheless, Tommy's skin crawled as he thought of some strange infection invading his body. The revenge of all those baby mice. He hastily set the scissors aside and forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand.

Things really weren't so bad, when he thought about it. Pam and the others were still occupied at the big farmhouse entertaining the clients. He just had to make sure he got things tidied up before they returned to the lab.

And there really wasn't that much to clear up. Blood on his lab coat, but that was nothing new. Some blood on the floor, but he could wipe that away in a minute. The only real problem was getting the cat back in its cage.

Tommy sat on his lab stool, staring down at the far end of the room towards the annexe. It hadn't made a sound since it had fled in there. Why was he so worried? All he had to do was go around the corner, into the dark, and get it.

What was the problem? The stupid cat was probably more frightened than he was.

Tommy's arm ached, each beat of his heart sending a hot pulse of pain along his hand. This time he'd wear the heavy blue gloves. All he had to do was go over to the bench and slip them on.

But Tommy felt a curious reluctance even to stir from his chair. Maybe he should wait a minute longer –

From the dark laboratory annexe came a loud thudding noise, then another, and another.

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Tommy jumped up from the stool and scooped the gloves off the bench nearby. He pulled them on, his bandaged right hand slow and clumsy, as he cautiously approached the annexe. Hesitating as he came around the corner, he made himself step into the darkened cubicle.

Immediately his foot struck something and Tommy almost fell over. He knew the layout of the annexe well enough to navigate it blindfolded. Or at least, he thought he did. Whatever he'd collided with had no business being in the middle of the floor. Tommy bent over and reached down cautiously.

He kept listening for the cat. He thought of it coming at him with its claws extended, maybe jumping for his face, reaching for his eyes.

Tommy held one heavy glove in front of his face while he fumbled on the floor with the other. He sank to a crouch and scuttled around in the darkness with his knees bent. It was awkward moving around like this and he was disoriented in the darkness. It took him a long time to find what he'd tripped over. The object was heavy and made a strange wobbling sound as he pushed at it.

Tommy paused and cocked his head in the darkness, trying to listen for the cat. Nothing. He slowly removed the glove on his left hand and reached down to touch the object. It was cool, its ribbed surface beaded with condensation.

Tommy recognized it as one of the big plastic refill bottles for the water-cooler.

The bottles were normally stacked on the floor next to the wall. The cat had somehow insinuated itself between wall and bottle and toppled it over. That had been the first thud he'd heard.

Tommy moved deeper into the annexe, swinging his foot cautiously ahead of him. He felt two more bottles lying in his path. He groped his way towards the wall and found that the remaining empty bottle was still stacked where he'd left it this morning.

It seemed odd that the cat had knocked over three heavy bottles full of water yet had left the lighter, empty one alone. He began to heave one of the full bottles back upright then thought better of it. Now he knew their position he might as well leave them where they were. The bottles were the least of his worries.

Tommy straightened up and moved to the table with the photocopier on it.

He felt safer now he was standing upright but he was still haunted by the idea of the cat going for his face. He kept the heavy plastic glove in front of his eyes while he fumbled on the table, seeking the desk lamp.

It was odd how disorienting the darkness was. The lamp didn't seem to be in its proper place. Tommy began to sweat. He vowed that the first thing he'd do once he found the desk lamp was to get that damned ceiling bulb replaced.

Well, maybe the second thing. The first thing would be to deal with the cat.

Tommy felt he was involved in a vendetta now. But he had no doubt about 172

who was going to win. As soon as he had the cat secured he could put it to good use.

There was still some data missing from a pesticide test that the lab was conducting for a Polish firm. The company needed some toxicity results and Tommy had designed just the experiment for them. It involved forcing a tube down an animal's throat directly into the stomach and then pouring a dose of pesticide down it. It was a slightly tricky procedure. You had to be very careful about pacing the administration of the pesticide – you didn't want the animal to die by choking. That would invalidate the experiment. The animal had to die as a result of receiving a lethal dose of the designated test substance.

Tommy had tried a similar procedure using a rabbit but it hadn't proved very satisfactory. He'd subsequently decided that a cat would be ideal.

And now he'd found just the cat.

'Just you wait, puss,' he murmured. 'Just you wait, you little bastard. I'm going to teach you to bite my hand. I'm going to give pussykins a

little drink she won't enjoy at all.'

Groping clumsily in the dark with one hand, Tommy finally found the photocopier and, working from its position on the table, he located the desk lamp.

He pressed the button on the lamp.

Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Still nothing. Had the bulb in this one gone as well? Tommy swore under his breath. The spare light-bulbs were in the storage cupboard in the annexe. There weren't any lights in the cupboard. How was he supposed to find them on the shelves in the dark?

But was it the bulb? The desk lamp had been working perfectly only a little while ago. Maybe it was something else. A memory surfaced in Tommy's mind, a memory from school-days. He'd been working in the biology lab with a group of other students and they'd decided to play a trick on the exchange student, an American. They'd switched off the boy's microscope at the wall socket. Being from the States the boy wasn't accustomed to having on–off switches on sockets. He'd spent half an hour trying to get the microscope to work before they'd let him in on the joke.

Tommy traced the power cable from the desk lamp. It looped from the table to a socket at floor level.

An odd thought occurred to Tommy. If the cat wanted to lure him into a vulnerable position for attack, this would be an ideal way of achieving it.

While he fumbled for the socket he would be crouching under the table. It would be difficult to move, and his neck would be exposed. The cat could climb silently onto the table and wait for him. When he rose from the floor his face would be exactly on a level with the table and the cat could –

'Stop it,' said Tommy, speaking out loud in the darkened annexe. 'It's only a cat. It can't think. It can't plan. It's just a stupid cat.'

He held the lamp's cable in one hand as he quickly ducked under the table.

He ran his other hand along the taut cable, found the wall socket just

above the floor, found the rocker switch on it and clicked it.

Nothing.

Kneeling there in the darkness Tommy began to panic. Then he remembered that he'd switched the desk lamp on and off repeatedly. He stood up and quickly scrabbled around on the table. He grabbed the lamp and clicked its switch one final time.

The light came on. Tommy had to shut his eyes at the painful glare. Suddenly the whole annexe was flooded with light.

He forced himself to open his eyes and he saw something small and black on the floor, moving with the great rapidity. The cat was coming out of the incinerator room. It darted along the wall, dodged the scattered water bottles and streaked past Tommy back into the laboratory.

Tommy cursed and recoiled with surprise as the cat flashed past. He lunged after the small animal but he was far too slow. 'Shit,' he said. Then he stopped and grinned. It didn't matter. The light was back on. Darkness had been the cat's only advantage and now he'd dispelled that.

The cat was at his mercy now. It was only a matter of time until he had it cornered and captured. Tommy smiled again. He was beginning to have second thoughts about the pesticide experiment. It was a good idea, but it could wait. Why rush things? First he could try a number of other procedures on the cat. The Draize eye irritancy tests, for example.

Tommy began to speculate about the kind of substances which were on hand in the lab, and which one it would be most satisfying to slowly drip into the eyes of the tethered black cat.

He glanced around the annexe, his gaze alighting on the heavy square ten-litre water bottles on the floor. Before he tidied them up, before he did anything else, he decided, he would replace the bulb in the ceiling light.

Tommy was just opening the door of the storage cupboard when he heard the sound from the main lab room. A clean metallic sound. A ringing, clinking sound.

Tommy froze. For one crazy instant he thought he recognized the sound.

He shook his head. It couldn't be. Yet it sounded just like the clicking of the release mechanisms on one of the animal cages.

Then the noise came again. Tommy turned away from the storage cupboard and ran into the lab. The cages were where he'd left them, stacked on the electric trolley. Only now they were all empty. The cats had escaped.

Tommy saw a furry curve of white tail just disappearing around the corridor towards the rodent section. Without thinking he launched himself forward 174

and grabbed the cat by the tail. It shrieked as he dragged it back into the lab and caught it by the scruff of the neck.

This white cat was older and fatter than the black one, and consequently slower. Tommy wouldn't have had much trouble getting her back in the cage even without his gloves on. The animal seemed dazed and cringed meekly back as he locked the door of the cage again.

That left two cats on the loose: the small ginger one and the vicious black beast who'd led him such a merry chase through the annexe.

Tommy went into the corridor, past the room where they stored the rodents, towards the primate section. That was when he remembered the dog he'd also brought across on the trolley. He doubled back to the kennels and found the cage just inside the door where he'd unloaded it. Empty.

Before he had time to do much more than register the fact he heard a sudden shrill clamour from the primate section, two rooms along.

In there, among the cages containing red-billed tamarin monkeys, he found the small ginger cat prowling around. The little animal didn't offer any resistance when he scooped it up and carried it back into the main lab. Unlike the black or white cat, this one didn't seem particularly intent on escape. It was merely curious about the strange place it had found itself in.

Tommy was locking the ginger cat back in its cage when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. A flash of light, coming from the far end of the lab.

Coming from the annexe.

Tommy's hands were soaking with sweat in the heavy plastic gloves. He stripped them off and let them fall and they slapped onto the concrete floor.

He walked towards the far end of the lab. As he got nearer he saw something had happened to the light down there. The annexe was dark again.

Tommy felt like he was caught in one of those nightmares which kept repeating itself. He peered cautiously around the corner into the annexe. At the back of his mind was a thought he couldn't quite begin to face. It had threatened to surface for several minutes now. Given a choice between going into the annexe and confronting the thought, Tommy chose the latter.

How had the cages come to be unlocked? Who had released the other two cats and the dog? Who or what?

Tommy repressed the thought again and forced himself to step around the corner into the darkness. As he did so the whole annexe lit up with a ghostly light. A pale green light which rolled across the ceiling and vanished again.

Tommy almost laughed out loud. It was the photocopier. Someone had switched the photocopier on and it was flashing its green light on and off.

Something else was wrong. His feet made a sloshing sound as he crossed the floor of the darkened annexe. Tommy realized vaguely that the tipped-175

over water bottles were leaking. Someone had punctured their membranes and the concrete floor was now awash with water. In the narrow corridor of the annexe it was slopping around his ankles.

For some reason this made Tommy think of run-out, a common problem in the lab. It happened when an animal's – usually a rodent's – water bottle discharged into a cage, and led to hypothermia or drowning. He remembered after such accidents seeing mice huddled in a corner to keep warm, including a mother and her dozen pups. On other occasions he'd found rodents stacked four or five deep in an attempt to avoid the rising water. It had occurred to him at the time that this was an interesting experiment which revealed the pecking order of the animals in a cage.

Tommy waded forward through the flooded annexe. This was

madness.

He had to see what was going on. The intermittent green flashes from the photocopier only made things more confused. He needed proper light. He had to get the desk lamp on again.

As before, he bent quickly under the table. As he kneeled in the water, reaching for the wall switch, it occurred to him how closely he was mirroring his earlier actions. Like a laboratory animal which had been taught a pattern of behaviour and, when given the correct stimulus, repeated it.

As he turned on the switch, the photocopier on the table above hummed and sent another wave of eerie green light rolling through the annexe. It flashed off the ceiling and was reflected on the water all around him. That was when Tommy saw the power cable from the lamp.

Only it was no longer connected to the lamp. It had been raggedly severed, bare wires trailing from one end. The other end was still firmly plugged in at the wall socket, though.

The socket he was switching on.

The last coherent thought of Tommy's life was that a cat might be able to flood a room. And a cat might be able to chew through a power cable.

But a cat certainly wasn't smart enough to know that a man would be elec-trocuted by the cable, or smart enough to trick him into doing it.

The thought brought Tommy no comfort at all as 240 volts surged out of the torn cable; as it flashed through the water and into his drenched body.

As the photocopier slammed to a halt and fuses blew and his corpse crashed back down onto the shallow water on the floor of the annexe.

Chapter 22

It had been a pure accident.

Sure, Webster had been looking through the computer network ever since he'd moved into the King Building, eager to ferret out its

mysteries. But he'd given up on this particular file. It appeared to have been corrupted during the catastrophe, years ago.

He'd cracked it open and taken a quick look and seen nothing but binary garbage. So he'd ignored it for weeks. But then he'd found the decryption program. It lived under an icon of a strange green beast with claws. When he activated the icon Webster had no idea what he might find. He was like a man with the keys to all the lockers in a big urban bus station. Opening files on the computer was like randomly opening lockers. There was no telling what you might discover inside, what people might have left behind. Usually it was something about as interesting as a stale sandwich or a worn out pair of sneakers. But there was always the chance you might find a million dollars in unmarked bills.

Or a severed head.

When Webster clicked on the icon of the clawed green beast he had no idea that it contained the entire security system for the King Building. The people who worked on the 51st floor had been given maximum authority over all the data transactions in the skyscraper. They could hack into any file, interrupt any process. They were the all-powerful gods of the network.

And when Webster logged into the security software it came back to life.

Waking up after years of dormant existence, the software decided it was fresh from the factory and that Webster was the authorized user. So it made him a god of the network and it showed him everything.

Thousands of files that seemed damaged and unreadable were simply in code. And the green beast software let Webster run around the system like a kid with X-ray specs, looking inside at the real contents.

That's how he'd found out the true story about the man called Vincent.

He'd gone straight to Mr Harrigan with the facts.

'You're gonna have to get on the pony and ride, son,' said the old Texan when he heard the facts.

'You want me to follow them? Go over there and locate them physically?'

‘I’ll follow as soon as possible. You can do it, Webster. They’ll spend a while 177

getting organized after they land. If we get you on a direct flight right away you just might catch up with them. Grab whatever you need and go now. I’ll have transport waiting for you at the other end. Something fast.’

Something fast turned out to be a police Porsche waiting on the tarmac at Thanet airport. Webster’s charter jet had rolled to a stop in the painted rectangle directly opposite the one where the IDEA jet was refuelling. It had apparently landed only an hour earlier.

The ground crew told Webster that the team had touched down and been in the middle of a huge English breakfast when they’d picked up a police bulletin.

The local authorities had been requested by IDEA to monitor the movements of Justine and Vincent. They had been picked up by a traffic monitor fleeing their home in London. Traffic records showed the progress of the vehicle every time it passed a traffic camera and had its bar-code read.

Their destination looked like Canterbury and Creed and the others had bundled into a minibus to rendezvous with the couple there.

Webster had never left the USA before, but the computer on the Porsche helped him with the local traffic rules and he’d just about mastered the art of driving on the left by the time he’d entered Canterbury.

He’d found the black IDEA minibus almost immediately. But when he parked and went over to inspect it he found it was empty. That meant they were out in the city somewhere, poised to make an arrest. Webster was sitting in the Porsche, wracking his brains helplessly, when he looked up and saw camera crews running past on foot.

That meant the data silence was broken. Mr Harrigan always said that getting good coverage of an arrest was as important as the arrest itself. If Creed’s team had alerted the local media that meant they were about to do it.

They were about to make contact.

Webster got out of his car and ran after the camera crews. Canterbury was like something out of a computer game. Old cobbled streets, little

narrow lanes. And the huge, weird-looking cathedral in the background. It looked ancient and kind of frightening. But then Webster tended to play the kind of computer games where the cathedral always concealed a baleful slumbering dragon. If the unlucky player woke it up, that was the end of him.

It occurred to Webster as he ran that he'd worked out the identity of the small green beast on the King Building computer. It was supposed to be a dragon.

And he'd woken it up.

He ran past crooked little gabled shops that overlooked the streets like sinister fairy-tale cottages. The camera teams were scrambling down an alley and Webster followed. They ran across a footbridge over a narrow stream and then along a side-street, their footsteps echoing in the afternoon sunlight.

Webster had begun to feel a pain in his side. He was wondering how much longer he could keep running when he looked up and read a sign on an old stone wall. Orange Street.

He ran past a line of shops. Computer shops, game shops, comic shops. The sign in one window consisted of the single strange word, *Siegi's*. A fat man and two thin men were staring out of the window at the commotion in the street. Webster forced himself to keep running. His lungs were scorching now and his feet hurt as he slammed them down again and again on the ancient stone pavement, pelting headlong after the camera crews. Those media kids were all in pretty good shape, but Webster wasn't going to let a pack of trendy little bastards outrun an IDEA man. He dragged air into his lungs and kept going.

He clattered after the camera teams as the street opened into a small square or plaza just opposite the main gates of the cathedral.

And there they were.

First he saw Artie, standing by the cathedral wall. Then he saw the man called Vincent standing up and moving away from a bench surrounded by pigeons.

Across the street Creed and the Bowmans were watching the man and suddenly Raymond Bowman said something to Creed and turned away. Creed tried to stop them but he had already reached the guy.

The guy was standing, still half turned towards the girl who sat on the bench surrounded by pigeons.

He looked like he was about to kiss her. He never got the chance.

Webster sucked air into his aching lungs. He shouted, ‘Wait!’

But it was too late. He saw the expression on the girl’s face change from joy to horror as she realized what was happening.

Justine was staring at the man in the black baseball cap. He was holding something in his hand, pointing it at Vincent, and Justine knew what it was.

But she couldn’t believe it. Even as she shouted at Vincent to look out she was praying that she was hallucinating. A spike in her hormone level making her see something that wasn’t there. A trick of the light.

But the gun was indeed there, clutched tight as the man squeezed the trigger and fired. And the impact was high on Vincent’s back, just above the shoulder blade, catching him as he was turning towards Justine and spinning him around with its momentum so he completed the turn and did a kind of little bow as he fell at her feet.

She sat on the bench and stared at him lying there with the blood oozing slowly out of him and she tried to scream but she couldn’t. She was surrounded by people wearing black baseball caps. She could see the words on the baseball caps now. IDEA. They were arguing among themselves and 179

shouting at other people with TV cameras and brandishing identity cards at gawkers and ordering the crowd to stay back and some distant part of her brain registered recognition. They were cops.

Two of the cops came towards her. A man and a woman with swaying black pony-tails. The woman grabbed Justine while the man dropped to his knees beside Vincent. She realized that it was the same man who had shot him.

One of the other cops was shouting now.

He was blond, with sweat-

drenched dreadlocks. He looked like he’d just run a marathon. ‘Don’t touch him, Raymond!’ he shouted.

But the man called Raymond ignored him. He wore a smile of satisfaction as he began to frisk Vincent in a deliberately leisurely fashion. At the same time the woman began running her hands over Justine. Justine hardly felt it.

All her attention was riveted on Vincent's left hand.

It was moving. Vincent was alive. As the cop frisked him Vincent's arm suddenly twitched. Before the cop could react, Vincent had reached out and clamped onto his wrist.

Raymond Bowman was a simmering volcano of suppressed rage. When he had first met his richly dysfunctional wife they had spent hours just talking, sitting up all night in his car in a sparse, salty stretch of grass outside Atlantic City, watching the empty grey beach being gnawed by the endless waves.

Then they kissed for the first time and he lost his heart. Chrissie was beautiful and she had the additional glamour of being emotionally wounded. Raymond had wanted to heal her.

He had always been a sucker for a bird with a broken wing. When he heard the tragic story of Chrissie's childhood he knew he'd be the man who would love her so well and understand her so deeply that her pain would abate.

When they were first married he was deliriously happy. He remembered coming across the word 'uxorious' in the dictionary and being astounded to read the definition – it meant 'excessively fond of one's wife'. How was it possible to be excessively fond of your wife?

But things change. Lately he'd simply come to hate the bitch.

He hated the way she took the ethical and intellectual high ground in all their arguments, using her psychiatric jargon to label him. She called him

'anal retentive'. She called him 'passive-aggressive'. And she sounded so snotty, so superior. He wanted to shut her up good and proper. After all, if it wasn't for his encouragement and his financial support, she never would have got her training as a psychotherapist in the first place. She never would have thought of applying to join the IDEA training program. And she certainly wouldn't have been accepted as a solo applicant. They only wanted her 180

as part of a couple, a stable combination. It was Raymond's weaponry

skills that clinched the deal. Chrissie had ridden to success on his back.

But when they were together Raymond still behaved the way he always had. Patient, attentive, unfailingly protective of her.

Even when the two of them were alone together he still treated her just the same. Kind. Reassuring. Patient. But inside he felt the rage gathering like lava, waiting to explode if it could ever find a vent.

He'd simply begun to loathe her. The way she snorted when she laughed, like some little pig digging for truffles. The way she thought she was always right. The way she held her teacup.

Raymond still smiled and hugged and reassured her, but all the while he seethed inside. If she'd looked into his eyes at the wrong moment she would have seen pure hatred beating there, barely restrained. Waiting to be un-leashed.

'Uxorious' was definitely the wrong word for Raymond now.

After all, she'd used him. Used him to get where she was today. That was her great skill, using people. Just like she'd used her father. Until she killed him.

Chrissie had shot her father dead on her birthday. The police found her hiding in the attic, wrapped in the wedding dress of her mother who'd died in childbirth, fifteen years ago to the day. The wedding dress was smeared with blood and she was still clutching the murder weapon. Except the local DA decided it wasn't murder after all. Chrissie won a self-defence plea and made a pretty good living on the talk show circuit for a year or so, describing the horror show of her childhood. Another victim of child abuse.

But IDEA wasn't a bunch of hick cops. They had discovered the truth. And the old Texan had told Raymond what really happened. The father had been innocent. She'd gunned him down in cold blood. By that time Raymond didn't have any trouble believing it. He knew how Chrissie liked to spin a story.

She always wanted to be the centre of attention and she usually managed it.

Attracting sympathy and dodging blame were her special talents.

So Raymond lay awake at night beside his wife, the murderer. Then

each morning he smiled at her and kissed her and brought her the ritual cup of fragrant strawberry tea in bed. All the while hating the slut. Wondering what he could do and hating her for her superior manner and psychiatric jargon. If anybody needed a shrink it was her. How could he ever have fallen for that injured animal act of hers?

But Raymond swallowed and concealed his rage. He avoided confrontation and nurtured his poisons, fantasizing about revenge. Someday he would get even. Someday he would let it all out.

Here, in the shadow of Canterbury cathedral, that day had arrived.

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As soon as the guy touched him it began to happen. Raymond had shot him with an anaesthetic dart and then bent over to cuff him. But despite the dart the guy was still semi-conscious, and he managed to grab Raymond by the wrist.

It was as if Raymond had made contact with a high-voltage power cable.

Raymond felt the force ripping through him like a storm, and he trembled with it. It felt like it would tear him apart. But it felt good, too.

Because this storm had the shape and flavour and colour of his own rage.

It was part of him, howling out of the blackest reaches of his mind. Blowing from the fetid choked swamps. He was letting it all out. All that poisoned stagnant air suddenly came alive, stirred into a tornado. It felt so good. Even as it tore him to pieces it felt great.

Raymond wanted to shout, ‘Who’s passive-aggressive now, you bitch?’

But he was much too far gone to master the power of speech. His mind had collapsed like a star, falling into itself so that all that remained was a single thought, a final mental symbol which signified rage. And the power of this symbol was such that it burned the brain which held it, hot as a lethal fever, poaching the complex grey proteins like an egg.

Then the heat increased, pushing way beyond fever levels, smoking his brain into a cinder and spreading down his spinal column, across his skeleton, and fanned out along his ribcage like heat following the

curved metal fins of a radiator. His heart sizzled and his lungs billowed flame as the rich pockets of oxygen in the alveoli fuelled the blaze.

The process was almost instantaneous, spreading and igniting, consuming his body in flame. Raymond's mass was transforming into pure energy at a speed that shouldn't have been possible. What had been a human being a second ago was now a ball of flame.

Raymond was dead but he'd got his rage out at last.

Christine was the second to die. She'd already begun to scream. She'd seen the fireball consume her husband and rise up off the cobbled street like a huge blazing balloon, floating away from the young man lying there in handcuffs.

Perhaps Chrissie knew what was going to happen next. Perhaps she sensed it.

Because she stopped screaming and made no move to flee as the fireball swept towards her, roasting pigeons as they tried to flap clear of its path, leaving a festive smell of roast fowl and a bitter tang of scorched feathers as it bounced off the cobblestones and swallowed her up in a ball of white flame hotter than any furnace.

The fireball grew as it consumed Chrissie's body. It bounced across the small plaza, passing so near to a group of French tourists that it melted their brightly coloured synthetic clothes. They screamed as the molten fabrics seared their bodies and the fireball rolled on. The camera crews panned desperately to 182

follow its path but the glare of the ball was so intense that it blew the camera chips and they recorded nothing but digitized smears of coloured distortion.

One intrepid newsman wrapped a silk scarf around his lens to try and bring the glare down to a manageable level. It worked. The sensory hardware in the camera functioned perfectly. Instead of quitting on him, the device recorded every movement of the extraordinary fireball as it ran up the cathedral wall, spilled back onto the cobbled street and then tumbled right onto the newsman, scorching him out of existence like a moth in a match flame. His camera exploded as he flared, charred and crumbled into ash.

While the tourist crowds screamed and fled, the three surviving IDEA men were rushing towards the bench where the fireball had been

born. Vincent was still lying on the ground, unconscious and unharmed, although the handcuffs on his wrists were uncomfortably hot to the touch.

Justine was kneeling over him, trying to unlock them. Artie pulled her off while Creed and Webster picked up the man and carried him away towards their van.

The fireball was spinning overhead now. It seemed almost playful, like a child's balloon on a summer's day, pushed here and there by random gusts of wind. Then suddenly it sagged and sank lower, descending back almost to pavement level. It headed purposefully up a side-street, flowing and rolling like ball lightning. It bounced abruptly back into the small plaza, scattering the pigeons and tourists again, then veered sharply off along a different route.

Creed was halfway along Orange Street when he looked back and saw the fireball coming after them. Webster looked back and saw it, too. They both began to run but the unconscious handcuffed body of Vincent was a dead weight, dragging them down.

Ahead of them Justine was struggling with Artie but when she saw the fireball bouncing towards them she stopped resisting. Together with Artie she ran back and helped half drag, half carry Vincent over a low wall running beside the street. The girl and the three IDEA men tumbled after him, just as the fireball swept past, brushing a metal traffic sign and leaving it sagging from its pole like a sheet of melted toffee.

The fireball rebounded and hit the opposite side of Orange Street. Inside the shop called Siegi's the fat man and the two thin men were still standing in the window, staring, when the fireball hit. The glass parted, splashing like water, liquified in the fantastic heat of the fireball. The three men inside the shop ignited like origami dolls made of cigarette paper. Feeding on their mass the fireball swelled and imploded, destroying the whole shop as a huge belch of flame floated scorched comics out into the air like big, black-winged birds.

Then the fireball burst back into the street, swollen and blazing, rolling back the way it had come.

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Back towards the cathedral. Creed and the others picked Vincent up and headed for the van. There was nothing they could do to stop it, and it seemed obscene to stay and watch. Not to mention dangerous.

Creed later learned what happened the way most people did, watching newscasts taken by helicopter and satellite, showing the smoking crater where the great cathedral had been. Commentators compared the disaster to Cher-nobyl. The official explanation held that a freak weather effect had created ball lightning which somehow detonated a pocket of gas in the city's ancient sewer system. No one believed the official explanation. Everyone had their own guesses. The reporter for the *Fortean Times* probably came nearest the truth. He also got the best photograph, the one of the naked children running, clothes blown off by the blast, with the mushroom cloud of smoke and dust and pulverized antique masonry rising behind them.

Creed saw that mushroom cloud. He watched it dwindling in the rear-view mirror as they sped away from Canterbury in the black IDEA van. The girl, Justine, was sobbing. She was wearing the handcuffs which had been on her husband. He didn't need them any more. He was now heavily anaesthetized and wired up to a life-support stretcher. Webster had done the connections wearing thick plastic gloves.

Webster kept trying to explain about Vincent, about the files he'd discovered in the computer at the King Building. He had read all about the power Vincent had. Webster kept saying they had to be careful and Creed didn't have any trouble believing him after what they'd seen in Canterbury.

But Creed was pretty sure that Vincent was harmless now. A spent force.

After all, he and Webster had both touched the guy when they first picked him up and carried him.

Creed didn't point this out. He thought Webster might freak out when he realized what could have happened. Creed didn't want Webster freaking out.

He had two team members dead and they'd kidnapped a civilian and the guy's wife wouldn't stop crying and now God only knew how many other people were dead back there in Canterbury. Creed didn't want any more problems.

He pushed down the accelerator and aimed the van towards the vanishing point on the motorway. He just wanted to get to Thanet airport and get the hell out of this country. To get back home and try to find some pieces of his life that didn't seem ruined.

Creed glanced into the rear-view mirror. He could see Justine crying and Artie's worried face under his black baseball cap and, behind both of them, the rising pillar of smoke that marked the spot where Canterbury Cathedral had once stood.

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Chapter 23

Dieter reflected how strange it was that vast changes in someone's life could be signalled by the sight of some tiny thing. A note left on a table announces the end of thirty years of marriage. A small blemish finally acknowledged in the mirror signals the end of life itself. Tiny signals.

For Dieter, the tiny signal was a dog running up a hill.

He was saying farewell to the clients when it happened. It had been a superb lunch. Maxine had excelled herself. And also, in all modesty, his own choice of wines had been splendid. Dieter had sat at the table, looking at the remains of the huge meal, reflecting what a fine word that was. Splendid.

Such a very English word.

Dieter was fond of the English and he loved his current job. Plenty of fresh air, the beautiful Kentish countryside. Excellent food, thanks to Maxine. Living close enough to Canterbury and London to buy decent clothes, but rural enough to take pleasure in nature. And of course the money was fine, and would remain fine, providing he could go on finding new clients, new markets.

And so Dieter had topped off a magnificent meal with a final devastating dessert wine, smoky and syrup-sweet, a glorious autumn gold in a bottle so deeply chilled that ice crystals had begun to form in it.

Then he'd shaken hands with the people from the drugs company and wandered out onto the circular driveway to bid them farewell. Their cars had pulled away and driven through the old farm gates and Dieter had stood there waving cheerfully, and that had been the end of it. Perfect end to a perfect day. Or at least, it should have been.

But instead of immediately returning to his office, Dieter had decided to go for a stroll. So he turned away from the big farmhouse and walked towards the pond. That was when he saw the dog.

He recognized it as one of the animals which had been scheduled for processing that day. It should have been secured in the laboratory kennels by now. But there it was, running up the gently sloping hills behind the lab building. Such a simple thing. A dog on a hill on an autumn day. But even then, before he went to look in the lab or the barn, Dieter felt a chill in the pit of his stomach.

Even then Dieter knew that this could spell the end of everything.

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He heard the sound of a car and the hiss of tyres on tarmac and turned to see Sean pulling up outside the big farmhouse in his van. Dieter turned and hurried towards the driveway.

Sean looked up as he climbed out of the van. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Up on the hill,’ said Dieter. ‘One of the animals has escaped. Fetch us weapons, please.’

‘But we want him back alive, surely.’

‘Please fetch us weapons. And for Pamela and Maxine also. You and Maxine check the barns. Pamela and I will go into the lab.’

If Dieter had known what he was going to find, he would have let someone else go into the lab.

‘What’s the matter with them?’

‘I don’t know. They’re breathing. They’re alive.’ Maxine looked up from the tattooed girl strapped in the chair. ‘Their pupils still respond to light so there’s still a certain amount of brain activity.’

‘You could have fooled me,’ said Sean. He had finished unbuckling the fat bearded man and the girl called Ace. They remained eerily still in their chairs.

If you watched carefully you could just about detect their breathing, a slight rise and fall of the chest. ‘They’re like vegetables.’

When he and Maxine had first come into the barn Sean had thought the prisoners were faking it. Playing dead so they could make a break for it. But their utter lack of response soon had him convinced. Now he joined Maxine and helped her remove the straps on the tattooed girl. Her skin had a waxy pallor that made the tattoos stand out

brightly. It was a singularly unhealthy skin tone. Her lips looked dry and chapped. Her body smelled of sweat and the liquorice stink of warlock. Sean put a hand on her face and gently lifted her eyelid. Her skin was slightly cool to the touch. The eye he revealed was empty of consciousness or character, staring up at him with a chilling blankness. He let the eyelid sag shut again.

They arranged glucose drips on the three inert bodies, as Dieter had ordered, then switched out the lights and locked up. It felt eerie leaving those silent forms lying there in the darkness and though he would never have admitted it, Sean was glad he wasn't on his own.

As they crossed the lawn back towards the big farmhouse he noticed Maxine was walking unusually close beside him. When she spoke it was in a low, confidential voice, as though she was afraid of being overhead. 'What do you think happened?'

Sean shrugged. 'I don't know. Maybe Dieter miscalculated their dosage.

Maybe the drug was so strong it just fried their brains.'

'No, I meant what do you think happened to Tommy?'

'I think he must have finally flipped out,' said Sean.

'How is Pam taking it?'

'Dieter's got her under heavy sedation at the moment. She isn't in much better shape than those three back there.'

'Do you think Tommy killed himself?'

Sean shrugged again. 'It would be a pretty weird way of going about it.

Electrocuting yourself in shallow water.'

'It's pretty weird for an accident, too.' They both fell silent for a moment.

'How many animals did we lose?' said Maxine.

'Just one dog and one cat. They came from the new acquisitions. There were five of them. The other two cats are still locked up in the

lab. The black bitch is still secure in the barn. She was on heat and I was going to take her into Canterbury tonight. Attract some more stock.' He sighed. 'I suppose I'm just going to have to find them.'

'How do you think they got out?'

'Tommy must have opened their cages.'

'That doesn't sound like Tommy.'

Sean was studying the tree-line on the hill behind the lab. Speculating about the missing animals, no doubt. 'What else could have happened?'

Despite the warmth of the autumn afternoon, Maxine shivered. 'I don't know,' she said.

You run.

You run with your own voice ringing in your ears. You are crying out at the top of your lungs, because at last you have escaped from the place of terror and you are free.

You shout your freedom to the wide winds and you run as fast as you can, the wet grass feeling wonderful and cool on your fleet bare feet.

You burst forth, escaping from the cold dead building into the soft living world. The ground kisses your feet. You flee, shouting joyfully, from the place of pain. You run naked across the cool damp grass into the endless clean air of the day.

And you gasp in the cold air like drinking cold water from a swift running stream. You hold your mouth open so the air rushes in over your strong jagged teeth. Your tongue pulses, shedding heat and you drink the cold flowing air and you run and run and shout with joy, grinning a savage, happy grin.

Free.

You race towards the crest of a hill, nose low to taste a million smells.

Gorgeous wafts of lavender coming to you from half a mile away to intoxicate your senses.

You bound up the hill towards the magic glowing globe of an orange

sun.

The low evening sun looks like it sits on top of the hill in easy reach, like a giant orange ball.

Many are the times you've chased that ball, but always it moves as you race up the hill towards it. Always the magic ball lifts away into the sky and eludes you. Hanging there, mockingly out of reach. No matter how red and low it gets you can never quite catch it, no matter how fast you run. Finally it vanishes in a dark sky to be replaced with the equally elusive silver ball.

But today you have a feeling you might manage to catch the hot orange ball. The memories of the place of pain are already fading. Even the details of your escape are fading and all that remains is a powerful lingering euphoria inside you. You can't remember what caused it but you feel wonderful and your blood is fuelled with joy. You don't question where that joy came from.

You just let it carry you on, faster than you've ever run before.

All that you can think of now is that great orange ball that lies ahead at the brow of the scented green hill, cool and sweet beneath your racing feet. Your feet fly along, doing your thinking for you. The orange ball fills your attention and carries you up the hill. The excitement of escape is transforming inside you, changing into the excitement of the chase. You feel that this time you are so swift that you may catch the sun.

So you race up the hill towards it, two strong legs driving you on, another two strong legs pulling you forward.

Another two legs?

Four legs?

You stop, panting on the hillside in a lather of confusion. Four. The thought of the number four hurts your head. But you make yourself think about it.

The number one is easy to understand, as is the number more-than-one.

But the number more-than-one, as you know, can be split up, splintering into unequal fragments, like a brittle yellow bone under gnashing teeth. And one of those fragments is called four.

You stand on the hillside, your pink tongue darting and steaming, catching your breath, wondering what is causing your head to ache.

Then you realize that it's because you're thinking and it's not a sensation you're accustomed to. It's almost physically painful. You strain at these concepts.

The dancing chemicals that form your mind are accustomed to accommodating far simpler thoughts. Nonetheless these chemical coalesce obediently, forming more complex patterns in the beautiful kaleidoscopic soup of brain chemistry.

They form unfamiliar patterns, shaping unfamiliar thoughts. And the electrical network that wires the heavy grey jelly of the brain works with the pat-188

terns, firing signals and sending messages, coordinating these changes in the intricate dance, each chemical pattern spreading its new message and passing on the strange new thoughts.

You realize you are thinking and your name is Jack.

Inside your mind there is an explosion like the birth of a new star. Impossibly complex patterns of thought formed.

Where am I? thought Jack.

I'm not inside a frigging dog, am I?

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Chapter 24

In the darkness of the hangar the cylinder glowed with an eerie green light that reminded Creed of an aquarium. It was made of some kind of specially reinforced glass so it could withstand the pressure of the fluid inside. It was about two metres high and half a metre in diameter, more than adequate for its contents.

Vincent Wheaton floated in the cylinder, his head rocking back and forth at the touch of some micro-currents in the liquid. His hair drifted in a dark corona around his pale face.

'He ain't dead,' said Mr Harrigan.

The big Texan still looked drawn and exhausted. He was claiming jet lag after the flight from New York, but Creed suspected that the

incident in Canterbury had taken its toll on the old man. The news was still full of terrible, vivid images: injured women and children lying in the street; a priest staring, blank with shock; the raw gaping crater where the cathedral had once stood.

IDEA was to blame for that whole mess and the old man knew it.

'He may look dead,' said Harrigan, 'but he's just fine. That's a life-support tube, full of nutrients. He'll stay in there, perfectly safe, until we revive him.'

'And when will you do that?' said Justine. She didn't turn to look at Creed or the old Texan. She kept her eyes on her husband, floating pale and silent in the green liquid.

'Just as soon as you help us find your friend, dear.'

'I keep telling you, Mrs Woodcott is not my friend.'

'And our computers keep telling us that you know more about her than anyone alive. Listen, girl. All you have to do is take Creed to London with you and find her for us.'

'What happens if I can't?'

'Now, let's not think negative.' The old man smiled and called out. 'Webster, Artie, give us a hand here, will you?' The two men came forward out of the shadows of the hangar. 'Artie, see if you can get the ground crew to help load Mrs Wheaton's husband onto the plane. Webster, be so kind as to keep the lady company while Creed and me have a little chin-wag. Come along, son.' The Texan nodded his big head towards the open door of the hangar and Creed followed him out into the night.

The sky was clear and Creed could see the stars glittering above the airport 191

tower. They were like runway lights that had floated up into the darkness.

He walked along slowly beside the Texan, breathing the night smells of tarmac and aviation fuel. They walked past the IDEA jet with the refuelling crew crawling all over it, busy preparing it for the return flight to New York.

When they were out of earshot they sat down on a flat-bedded

electrical truck stacked with luggage.

Among the suitcases and boxes on the truck were the body bags that had been flown over for the remains of Raymond and Chrissie Bowman, before it was realized that there wasn't anything left of them to take home for burial.

The bags lay there draped across suitcases, flat and empty. They were made of heavy-duty plastic in the inevitable black with the IDEA logo on them. They reminded Creed of Anna. They'd put her in a bag like that and he'd looked down as they zipped it shut and then he'd walked out of the room, outwardly calm but knowing deep inside that his own life was over, left behind in that dark vinyl bag with her.

Now, sitting here on this English airstrip watching the lights of planes passing overhead in the night, Creed felt weightless with sadness.

'Is something wrong, son?'

'What do you mean?'

'Is there anything you want to talk about?'

'I think I understand what's expected of me.'

The old Texan sighed. 'I knew there was something wrong. You don't get as long in the tooth as this old hound without learning a few things about people.

And I can tell you're troubled, son. I can tell by the way you talk, the way you look, everything. Now tell me about it. Is it the business in Canterbury?'

'Well, what do you expect?' said Creed.

'The shit hit the fan, that's for sure,' sighed the big Texan. There was the flinty rasp of an old-fashioned cigarette lighter in the darkness. The old man's face lit up momentarily as he applied a small flame to his cigar. Then there was just the afterglow of phantom colour on Creed's vision and the glowing red tip of the cigar in the night. The old man grinned at him in the cherry glow. 'I trust we're far enough away from that aviation fuel.' He cleared his throat and his expression became serious again. 'About Canterbury, son. No one knew that was going to happen. No one wanted it to happen. We just didn't know how dangerous that fellow was. Webster finally figured it out and he bust a gut trying to get to you and warn you. Too bad he didn't get

there in time, but that's just the way it goes.'

'We knew we had to be careful, though. You told us that when you briefed us.'

'And you took notice of it. I know you did. Both Artie and Webster told me.

They saw you trying to stop Raymond Bowman. But that was a strong-headed 192

boy, as stubborn as a mule. You couldn't stop him. He insisted on putting the handcuffs on the fellow.' The old man puffed on his cigar and exhaled aromatic smoke into the night. 'Raymond Bowman was a fool. Now he's a dead fool.'

'There are a lot of other people dead, too. And I'm not sure it's worth it.'

The Texan turned and looked at Creed. 'I didn't have you figured for a quitter, son.'

'I didn't have myself figured for a kidnapper, either.'

The big man winced, his wrinkled face folding up sadly in the red glow of the cigar. He breathed another lazy mouthful of smoke and peered at Creed from dark, sunken eyes. 'I don't think that's a fair word to use.'

'No? This girl Justine hasn't committed any crime.'

'Not that we know about.'

'And neither has her husband. Now we're forcing her to help us while we hold him hostage.'

'That ain't such a fair word, either.'

'What else do you call it? We've got him floating in a life-support tank doped to the eyeballs.'

'And from what we know of the guy, I'd say that's the safest damned place for him.'

'Look, what happened in Canterbury was bad beyond anything I've ever experienced.'

‘I know, I know.’

‘But I could just about live with it if I’d been doing my job.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Busting crooks. But these people are civilians.’

‘Creed, listen. This is a war we’re fighting here. And sometimes in a war civilians get hurt. That’s hard, but that’s just the way it is. What are we supposed to do? Give up? If we lose the war the enemy takes control. The scum who peddle drugs on our streets will rule the world. Maybe what happened to Justine and Vincent is unfair. But are the two of them really so important that we should surrender our whole war effort?’

Creed sat in silence. The old man reached out and rested a big hand on his shoulder. ‘I’m counting on you, son. Take the girl to London and find Mrs Woodcott.’ He stood up and discarded the stub of his cigar. It bounced off the dark runway, shedding sparks. He turned to go, then looked back. ‘And Creed.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Make sure you come back in one piece. I’m not going to live all that much longer and I need someone to pass everything on to. And you’re the man.’

Chapter 25

Ace’s stomach rumbled. She was very hungry. Soon she’d have to stir and find something to eat. But first she wanted to think things through.

Ace remembered that it had begun with the bird. Watching the small bird fluttering around in the barn where she had been trapped. Trapped? It was only a matter of hours since she had been held prisoner, but already the idea seemed unreal. Ridiculous. How could anyone ever trap her? She was strong and free and she felt she had the power to run forever.

She could remember being strapped into the chair. At the mercy of Dieter and the others. She could remember it; but she couldn’t believe it.

The world was a place of strange new emotions. When Ace thought about the bird her heart raced with excitement and her mouth filled with hot jets of saliva. On one level her mind fought to hold a dispassionate abstract memory of the bird. On a deeper, stronger level it responded to the image of the bird with a savage excitement. Why remember a bird if not to be excited by it?

Memories of the bird sparked the hunting instinct and focused the attention until her awareness was a fine cutting edge. Thinking of the bird sharpened her mind the way scratching at a rough piece of wood sharpened her claws.

Ace stretched and yawned. She lay on soft, sweet, scented earth under a gentle canopy of leaves. The leaves shielded her from sight and gave her warmth. She felt a great fondness for the leaves. It was as if they were deliberately protecting her. The thought of leaves and shelter began to relax her. Her racing heartbeat slowed and the hot longing to fight and hunt began to wane.

She shook her head to clear it, causing the delicate fringe of leaves above her head to shake in sympathy. The leaves seemed to share her feelings.

Ace tilted her head up and let the leaves rub playfully across her face. A caress. This big green plant had extended its protection to her and now it was stroking her. Ace experienced a powerful sudden unadorned love for this sprawling fragrant plant with its soft leafy hands that touched her. Her joy surged and she opened her mouth and nipped at the dangling leaves. She bit them affectionately with her sharp teeth; gently, though, so as not to rupture their delicate green skin.

The bitter medicinal fragrance of the leaf invaded Ace's nose and mouth.

She couldn't resist it. She bit deeper, making the plant juices squirt in her 195

mouth. She tore into the leaf and chewed it. A few moments after swallowing it her stomach decided the leaf was of no value, so she casually regurgitated it on the grass nearby.

Ace stretched and heard birds calling in the distance.

Birds. She had been trying to think about a bird. Trying to remember.

It wasn't always easy thinking in this new mind of hers. She would begin to think, setting off with a certain destination in mind, a certain goal, but her thoughts would veer off in another direction, leading her somewhere else entirely. Like the thought of the bird leading irresistibly to the thoughts of hunting. She hadn't yet learned how to navigate through the powerful new emotions and behaviour patterns she kept encountering.

Now she tried to think about the bird again. She'd already forgotten why it was necessary, but she knew it was. Ace crawled back into her bower of leaves and lay down on the shady grass, making herself relax and think about the small bird in the barn, trying to ignore the thrill of the hunt for a moment.

It wasn't easy.

The small bird had fluttered above her while she lay strapped in the chair, trapped and helpless. This memory filled Ace with fury. She wanted to slash at the ones who had trapped her, feel her claws slide beneath their soft pink flesh, and drag them tearing back out. To taste their hot blood in her mouth.

Ace was shaken by the power of the anger. But she relaxed and let it pass through her, not interfering with it. She knew she mustn't fight it; that would only prolong the emotion. Finally the anger died out, like a flame that had nothing left to consume. When it was gone she let herself remember the chair again, and being a prisoner. And the bird. The bird was important. Ace couldn't remember why, which was frustrating. It was like forgetting a word or a name, but feeling it on the tip of her tongue. Her tongue. Ace yawned and felt her long tongue dart out of the pink cavern of her mouth. She rolled over under the comforting canopy of leaves, stretching luxuriously. It was such a pleasure to stretch, and such hard work to think. Unaccustomed hard work. But she forced herself. She thought about the bird. It was important.

The bird had caused it to happen. Ace couldn't remember what 'it' was, but she knew if she persisted the memory would return. She just had to find her way to it in this strange new mind of hers, like picking her way through an unfamiliar maze.

She had been trapped and they had given her something. Ace breathed the clean forest smells around her and suddenly she remembered a different smell. Her keen memory brought the scent back to life for a moment, as though it filled her nostrils now. That

strong liquorice smell. Warlock. They had given her warlock. And they had trapped her and she had been desperate to escape. The warlock had rushed through her blood and affected her mind 196

and she had been longing to escape.

Escape. Once again her emotions exploded within her. To be free, not con-strained. To attack the hand that held her. Ace remembered how she had sunk her teeth into Tommy Hunnicutt's plump white hand and the great jagged flash of joy that had filled her, and which filled her again now in memory. She had bitten the hand as it took her out of the cage and she had escaped.

But she had escaped before that. Warlock had done something to her mind.

She had been trapped in the chair but she had managed to escape. She had somehow escaped without moving her body. And the bird had something to do with it. The small bird fluttering above the chair where she was trapped.

The bird had flown across the barn and landed. . .

Where had it landed?

Somewhere bad. Somewhere so bad that it enraged her to think of it. Ace fought the fury down, trying to keep her mind clear. The bird. Where did it land? On the bad thing. The thing which kept you trapped. The thing that Tommy Hunnicutt had lifted her out of, just before she bit his hand.

The cage. The bird had flown across the room and it had landed on the cage. Cages. There had been more than one. The bird had fluttered above Ace and landed on one of the cages. And Ace had been straining to escape, with the massive dose of that strange drug invading her brain, doing things to her.

She remembered the sensation of her mind seeming to float, an intoxicating, dangerous sensation as though she was a balloon that might slip its knot and bob up and float away. Escape. She had wanted to escape. And warlock wanted to help her. There was no way out of the chair. The straps held her.

But they didn't hold her mind.

There had to be an answer. There had to be a way out.

The bird. The bird had held the answer. First by drawing her attention.

Ace's gaze had become fixed on the bird, following its erratic flight as if hyp-notized. The random fluttering path of the bird had seemed fascinating. A pattern of great beauty and complexity. Her drugged mind had become completely absorbed in following its motion.

And then the bird had landed on the cages, almost as if it was leading Ace to the solution. Ace wanted to escape. Well, here was the answer. Ace had stared at the cages where the bird perched and she had felt like a slow student who couldn't quite grasp the solution offered by her teacher.

So the bird had offered her a clue. She wanted to escape? Sometimes birds wanted to escape. Sometimes birds were kept in cages. They too longed to escape. And sometimes the doors of the cages were left open. And the bird flew out.

Ace's body was trapped. But her mind was free. Her mind was a bird flapping frantically in a cage, beating its wings against the bars. But the door 197

of the cage was open. Warlock had opened it for her. Or perhaps the door was always open and warlock had merely revealed this fact to her. Maybe it was a fact that necessarily remained hidden during the rest of her life. After all, it was a dangerous thing, to have your mind spread its wings and leave your body like a bird leaving its cage.

So the bird had taught her a lesson. It had given her something of great power. A metaphor, an idea. It had shown her how she could escape.

And with warlock's help she had done just that. Her mind had fled her body and flown, free.

But where to?

The bird had shown her that, too. It had led her eyes all around the barn until it had settled on its perch.

So Ace had flown out of her body. Like a bird from a cage.

Straight into another cage.

A real cage this time, not an idea, not a

metaphor. A cage with bars of steel. And Ace had stared out of those bars, staring through new eyes. Stretching with new muscles in a new body. She had peered out of the cage and looked back across the room and seen the oddest sight of her eventful young life.

She had seen herself. Seen a girl called Ace, strapped into a chair. Helpless.

Suddenly oddly pale-looking. It was her body in that chair but there was something wrong with it. Even from across the room she could see that.

Her body looked like a puppet with its strings cut. It gave her a strange chill to look at it. She had shivered and licked her fur in a desperate attempt to comfort herself.

Her fur?

For a moment fear had threatened to overwhelm her. But then she had turned her head and seen something else.

The others. Also trapped in their chairs. The bearded man. And the girl called. . .

Now, lying here in the quiet woods, breathing the sweet night air, Ace struggled to remember the girl's name. All that came to mind was a taste. The flavour in her mouth made her stomach clench with hunger. She could taste the sea. Then there came the strong thought of soft meat in her mouth. Ace thought of discarded fishbones and. . .

Shell. The girl with the tattoos called Shell. And the man called Jack. Ace had stared at them, from her new vantage point. Through the bars of her cage she watched them, struggling in their chairs. Their loud human voices had called to each other excitedly. They could see that something was wrong with Ace. With her old body, that is.

'What's happened to Ace?' Jack had shouted. Or maybe he had merely whispered the words. His human voice had boomed in Ace's sensitive ears.

'She's gone,' said Shell.

Jack had stared fearfully at the limp body in the chair, the staring eyes drifting slowly shut. Eyes as blank as an idiot's. A moment earlier

Ace had been staring out from behind those eyes. Now she was –

'Gone? Bloody gone where?'

Then Ace had called out to them from her new body and they had both turned their heads to stare. Jack looked at the cat in its cage and said, 'Something's happening. I don't like this.'

'Warlock has taken Ace. Now we must follow her.'

'Follow her where?' His voice was edged with fear. Ace could clearly hear the rise and fall of his emotions with each syllable.

Ace howled from her cage, to show Jack the way. Jack had shouted something then, really scared now. Because the black cat was making a noise unlike anything he'd ever heard before. A prolonged howl which began to sound like words. It was as though the cat was imitating him. Except the sound the cat made sounded slightly different. Jack had yelled, 'Follow her where?' And the cat made three long yowling sounds. The first rose and fell in two lingering syllables. It sounded like 'follow'. And then the cat made a shorter, harsher burning sound rolling out of its throat, which sounded like 'her'.

Then finally, peering out at him from its cage, the small black cat had made what was almost the same sound. But this time it was higher and shriller. The cat had stared through the bars, looking directly at Jack. And it had cried,

'Here.'

Jack had discovered that he quite enjoyed being a dog.

It was a seductive sensation. He felt a vast excitement at being so small and so mobile after being trapped in the barn. He enjoyed dashing across the great sweeping green expanse of the hills, suppressing the urge to bark at the top of his voice. The excitement gave him the energy to run and the running, in turn, fed his excitement.

Sometimes the sheer joy of existence had been too much for him and he simply had to stop and collapse and roll around on the damp slopes of sweet-smelling grass.

It hadn't been this way at first, though.

His first reaction had been panic. When he'd realized he was trapped

inside a dog's body he'd felt such a surge of fear that he thought his mind might snap.

In a way, it had. Jack's intelligence was floating symbiotically in the dog's brain and when he gave in to panic his consciousness had vanished momentarily, sinking below the surface and allowing the dog's personality to rise in its place. His fear had turned to dog-fear, a deep, primitive sensation that 199

threatened to shake his heart to pieces in his narrow chest. It was the atavistic fear of night hunting and moon-howling. The fear of the pack animal who suddenly finds himself alone. The fear of the dog who smells death stalking him upwind, approaching with the burning, angry scent of the bear or wolf.

But it was also a fear fired by abstract concepts. Concepts which the dog portions of Jack's mind couldn't possibly understand. Without a tangible object the fear had swiftly faded and this had caused Jack's consciousness to surface and reassert itself. He was perversely angry at his mind's inability to be scared at his predicament. Stupid dog. And this anger had burned away the last of his fear.

But anger was an emotion the dog could share wholeheartedly and once again Jack found his thoughts eclipsed as this mind was overwhelmed with hot brute rage, the need to sink teeth into the neck of a foe and drag it down and kill it. It was probably only a minute or two before Jack managed to regain awareness, but it felt like hours. The hot red pathways of rage were well worn and easy to follow.

Thinking with this new shared mind was like learning to ride a bicycle.

Jack could only persist for a certain amount of time before he wobbled and fell off, surrendering to powerful primal dog concepts, his personality lost in a simpler, more vivid realm.

Two things helped him regain control and keep it. The first was Ace. He was straining to recall what had happened in the barn and that led him to Ace and how she had shown him the way to escape. Even now the whole episode seemed unreal. Jack couldn't quite believe it. Had warlock really freed his consciousness and allowed it to pass out of his body? Perhaps the drug had simply driven him mad and everything he was experiencing now was just an elaborate hallucination. If so, there was no way he could tell. Reality or delusion? In fact, that was the fundamental question of all conscious existence.

That's a pretty deep thought for a dog, thought Jack, tongue lolling from his toothy, grinning mouth.

But thinking of Ace had relaxed him. It triggered behaviour patterns deep in the dog brain. The pattern of dog and master. When Jack thought of Ace he was flooded with trust and well-being. Ace neatly fitted the model of a wiser, superior entity and that was a model the dog mind could comprehend.

Thinking about her gave Jack a sense of security and deep comfort, the way an intensely religious person might respond to thoughts of god.

This calmer mind state soon gave him a firmer foothold and he found he could shape complex thoughts with greater confidence. He could follow complex chains of reasoning through to their logical conclusion.

The second thing that strengthened his control was a fence post. A weathered piece of wood leaning at a drunken angle on the edge of the road above 200

the farm. He came wandering out of the trees and the old fence post called to Jack. Literally.

'Hey you! Dog!' Jack heard the voice, but he didn't hear it with his ears.

The words began with a tingling at the tip of his long nose and blossomed deep in his head. 'You, dog! All dogs! I am the red mongrel and I challenge you all. To fight any time, to roll belly up any time and acknowledge me as the stronger.' The voice grew more defined as it went on, assuming subtlety and timbre.

Jack stood staring at the old fence post, wondering if it was haunted, wondering if he was losing his mind. Maybe he was possessed by some kind of evil spirit. After all, what was possession if not hearing alien voices in your head? Maybe such things happened to dogs. But the dog portion of Jack's mind seemed quite unperturbed by the phenomenon.

The voice echoing in his head was bullying and boastful, but it gradually began to change. 'I fear nothing. Nothing that walks or crawls or flies,' it announced, a note of uncertainty creeping into it. 'Except perhaps for the farm.'

There was a tremor in the voice now. ‘The dark farm,’ it said. ‘The farm where the humans wear white coats and carry knives and lock our brothers away and burn and cut and maim and poison. Beware the dark farm, my brothers. Beware, beware, beware.’

The voice faded. Jack turned to stare down towards the farm but all he could see was the chaotic mass of trees on the hillside. He swung back and looked at the old fence post, taking a deep breath. Instantly the voice was in his mind again. ‘Hey you! Dog!’ it boomed. ‘All dogs! I am the red mongrel and I challenge you.’ Exactly the same words again, in the same sequence.

Like a recording.

A recording. That was when Jack began to understand what was happening. He approached the fence post, moving cautiously through the long grass.

As he drew nearer his nose twitched and he realized he could make out other voices. The red dog’s boastful message dominated but there were other dogs talking, offering their own messages faintly in the background. The closer he got to the fence post the clearer the other voices became. By now Jack knew what was going on.

Passing dogs regularly marked the post, taking a leak against the old wood.

Their urine contained chemical messengers that allowed them to communicate with other dogs. It was like graffiti, thought Jack, although some of the messages, like the red dog’s, were quite long and elaborate.

The red dog’s message dominated, but only because it was the most recent.

The others had had time to fade. By jamming his muzzle close to the post and sniffing carefully Jack could detect messages that were weeks old.

He stayed there for the better part of an hour, fascinated by the phenomenon. Most of the messages had a similar content: a declaration, often boastful, about the dog who marked the post. Then a quick narrative account of recent events. Hints, tips, news.

Jack thought of the secret symbols English tramps were once said to have used. If a tramp found a house where the people were kind and gave him a meal he would carve a small coded sign on their gatepost, advertising the fact to other homeless wanderers. If the household was hostile, that fact would be recorded, too.

The scent messages on the old fence post reminded Jack of that. Or of a noticeboard at the university, he thought, grinning his toothy grin.

Most of the messages made some mention of the farm. None of the local dogs had any clear understanding of what went on there, but they all knew it was a place to avoid and they made that clear in their graffiti.

After he had inspected all of these, right back to the oldest, most weather-eroded, Jack felt an irresistible urge to add his own contribution. He forced himself to refrain, making his bladder relax.

Jack had a better idea.

After he returned cautiously back down the hill, getting inside the farmhouse proved surprisingly easy. The two main doors were locked but the kitchen had a stable-style half door and only the bottom section was swung shut. Jack backed up and took a long run, clearing it with a single powerful leap that carried him skidding across the floor, claws scrabbling on the tiles.

The table and counters were covered with the remains of a sumptuous meal and Jack made himself ignore the luscious smells. He had a mission. He padded through into the corridor along synthetic carpet that smelled of some kind of cleaning agent. Finding Dieter's bedroom was no problem. He could smell the little bastard's personal odour as soon as he entered the house. Jack could tell that the house was empty and he came prowling into the room without hesitation, his dog heart pounding with excitement.

Excellent, just as he'd hoped. The closets were all wide open. Jack entered the mirrored enclosure. On hangers and shelves were suits, jackets, ties, trousers, shirts, sweaters, belts and shoes of subtle colour and beautiful cut.

He sniffed at the expensive fabrics and leather and then he composed himself.

Or, rather, he composed his message. He phrased it in his mind, letting his fury etch it deep. Then he let his aching bladder go.

By pacing himself he managed to spray just about every square centimetre of the closet space. Of course, some of the items on hangers were too high for him to soak properly, but he comforted himself with the thought that even these received at least a good splashing on the regions nearest ground level.

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When he finished he retreated from the closet and took a long deep sniff.

Sure enough, there was his message, echoing loud and clear in his own head.

'Dieter is a snivelling sissy.'

Jack barked happily and bounded out.

On leaving the farmhouse he had intended to skirt the pond and barns, giving the laboratory a wide berth, and head straight back up into the hills.

But as soon as he was in the open air a smell hit him.

Its effect on him was so intense that Jack's consciousness was eclipsed and the dog in him took over altogether. There was no conscious thought as his legs carried him back towards the pond, then scrambled around the smaller farmhouse.

There she was. A black dog with a red collar. Sheba.

Jack had known Sheba ever since Shell had bought her as a puppy. And of course, he was glad to see that she had escaped from captivity somehow.

But that didn't begin to account for the extraordinary emotion he felt now.

It was a reaction so explosive that all other thoughts simply vanished. He stared at the sleek black dog and raced towards her without hesitation. Jack remembered vaguely that there was something he should remember about Sheba. As he raced up to her and sniffed her he remembered what it was. She was on heat.

Your sexuality is going to get you into trouble, said the last fading ember of his human consciousness. Then Jack forgot about that and

everything else.

Sheba filled his consciousness.

His simplified hybrid mind observed the events, converting experience into the simplest of caricatured categories. He lunged at Sheba. He couldn't stop himself. He was a dog, no longer a human being. She was a dog and she was beautiful. She was begging for it. He had to have her. He reared up behind her triumphantly.

He was chuckling a doggy chuckle when the net came down on him.

Jack spun around and tried to fight the strong synthetic mesh. But the more he fought the more entangled he became. He opened his jaws and tried to bite at the net but his teeth got caught and the mesh cut into the delicate tissues of his mouth. He tried to gouge at it with his claws but all four of his legs were caught fast.

His eyes rolling in his narrow skull, Jack stared up at the grinning blond man who held the net.

'Got you,' said Sean.

As Jack was dragged, snarling and gnashing, back towards the barn, he tried to fight off despair. He'd been recaptured and he was even more vulnerable now than he'd been in his own body. These people might do bad things to 203

a human being, but there was absolutely no limit to what they'd do to an animal.

The man called Sean was hauling Jack into the cool, shadowed interior of the barn. Jack had stopped struggling. There was no way he could get out of the net. But one thought gave him hope.

Ace. Ace had shown him the way out of his body when they took warlock.

She had released him from the cage in the laboratory. As long as Ace remained free there was hope for him.

Sean dragged him across the concrete floor towards one of the low electric trolleys with two cages on top. A shape stirred in one of the cages. That was when Jack saw the small black cat. The cat who was now Ace.

They'd captured Ace as well.

'Got you,' said Sean with satisfaction. 'Got you both.'

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Chapter 26

Creed liked driving at night. Ever since he was a kid, riding sleepily as a passenger in his dad's station wagon, he had loved the feeling. There was something mysterious about the world in darkness and the sensation of passing through it on a journey, on a quest.

When he was young he had watched the passing landscapes of the Midwest: grain elevators, small flat prairie towns, wide, boundless fields. Occasionally stops at railway crossings to wait for an endless string of freight cars to rumble past.

The scenery here was different. Lush green hills and woods rising and curving, then giving way to angular concrete forms that masked dense housing as he neared London. Creed was driving on the main highway, or motorway as the locals called it, that led up from Kent.

The street lights in England were a strange amber colour which Creed immediately liked. They streamed past as he kept the Porsche at a steady ninety miles an hour. The engine note of the car was complex, smooth and inte-grated. It was the same police-issue car Webster had used when he had raced to Canterbury. The old Texan had got it serviced by the local IDEA office and filled it with useful goodies and now Creed was finding it a pleasure to drive.

'Do you know why the cops in this country drive Porsches?' Creed glanced over at the woman sitting beside him. Justine's face was alternately hidden in shadow and revealed in flashes of yellow light as they flashed past the street lamps. She remained staring straight ahead, saying nothing. Creed kept talking anyway. 'The British cops found they were always getting into high-speed chases with drug dealers who would outrace them. Because the dealers always drove Porsches. So the police figured if you can't beat them, join them. Nowadays Porsche even have a special model they build exclusively for the British police.'

Justine said something, low and quick.

'Sorry, I didn't catch that.'

‘I said “Go screw yourself.”’

‘What’s the matter, didn’t you like my story? Usually girls love a long rambling anecdote about automobiles.’

‘You might as well give up,’ said Justine. ‘Because we’re not going to be friends.’ She rubbed her face and her handcuffs flashed with reflected light.

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‘Listen, I’m as unhappy about this situation as you are.’

Again Justine said something so quickly and quietly that he couldn’t hear it.

‘What?’

‘I said, “Go screw yourself”.’

Creed hit the brakes. As the Porsche slowed with a squeal of rubber he steered it into the concrete siding that served as an emergency escape lane for the motorway. He put the handbrake on, wrenched the door open and walked around the Porsche to the passenger side. He flipped the door open and dragged Justine out by the handcuffs. Late night traffic sped past on the motorway, exhausted drivers glancing at them with curiosity.

Justine watched him with dark eyes, resigned to whatever was going to happen next.

Creed unlocked the handcuffs. He got back into the car and threw them into the back seat. Justine stood staring at him through the open door, rubbing her wrists where they’d been chafed by the metal. Creed sat watching her silently.

She hesitated for a moment then got back into the car beside him.

As Creed started the car she glanced at the cuffs lying discarded on the back seat. ‘I would have thrown them into a ditch,’ said Creed, ‘but who knows when they might come in handy for a meaningful relationship.’

‘Everything’s changed. I used to live around here, but I hardly recognize it.’

‘Maybe it looks different at night.’

‘No. I know how it looks at night. I spent most of my time wandering around here after dark.’

‘I’ll bet you did,’ said Creed.

‘What is that supposed to mean?’

‘I imagine you were a wild child.’

‘There used to be a big hotel there, a Hilton I think. It’s gone now.’ Justine peered through the windscreen at the dark London streets. ‘The park’s still here, anyway. The flowers were always beautiful in there in the spring. I took a bath in the fountain once with some friends. Swimming in the fountain by moonlight.’

‘Like I said, wild child. Where are we now?’

‘Lancaster Gate, heading for Notting Hill.’

‘Sounds kind of sinister and old-fashioned. I like it.’

‘Don’t get your hopes up. It’s mostly full of Japanese tourists. Or at least, it always used to be. I lived in a squat in Ladbroke Grove with twelve other people and a dog. They were all complete drop-outs without a scrap of education but they could all beg for money in fluent Japanese.’

‘Including the dog?’

Justine rubbed her mouth and Creed realized she was hiding a smile. ‘No,’

she said. ‘The dog never could quite master the consonants.’ She glanced out of the window. ‘Can you hang a left here?’

Creed turned off the main road and into a side-street full of brightly lit shops with hand-lettered signs in Arabic in their windows. ‘Left again,’ said Justine, and they were suddenly in a broad avenue flanked with tall white Edwardian buildings.

‘A lot of money in this neighbourhood,’ said Creed. ‘What are these places?

Rich people’s homes?’

‘That and embassies, hotels, knocking-shops.’

‘Knocking what?’

‘Brothels,’ said Justine. ‘Take a right here.’ They took another turn and the street became seedier, more rundown. The same antique white buildings stood on either side of the road but the windows were boarded up, graffiti wrapped around the pillars by the doom and paint was peeling off the walls in big mouldering patches.

‘Nice.’ said Creed. They passed a whole city block where the decaying old buildings vanished and were replaced by a row of pristine modern structures.

‘What happened here? It looks like the place was bombed and rebuilt.’

‘Something like that. Can we stop along here, please?’

Creed pulled over by the side of a vacant lot. An empty piece of land on a street corner big enough to accommodate a fair-sized building. He thought it was weird to find a patch of waste ground in a high-density housing area like London.

As Creed got out of the car he peered into the darkness and saw that it wasn’t completely empty. In the middle of the long grass in the lot there was a block of concrete with some kind of statue on top of it.

Justine got out of the car and stared across at the statue but she made no move to go any closer.

‘Is this a nostalgic moment for you?’ said Creed. He didn’t look at Justine.

He was keeping an eye on the street, checking it out. There was the occasional small group of pedestrians wandering past. They were mostly young, mostly male, and when they saw the Porsche they detoured around it at a healthy distance, obviously recognizing it as an unmarked police car. Creed got the impression that these weren’t model citizens.

‘There used to be a pub here,’ said Justine. ‘It was called The Moonchild.’

‘They told us a bit about that at our briefing. They had a big riot or something, huh?’

Justine ignored the question. ‘It used to be my local when I lived around here.’

‘You used to go there to score.’

Justine stared at him. ‘That’s right.’

‘From Mrs Woodcott.’

‘Right.’

‘What’s that statue? A memorial for the pub?’

‘No,’ said Justine. ‘For the people who died in it.’

Creed stepped away from the car and walked into the vacant lot. Long grass swiped at his legs as he walked towards the statue. It was an abstract shape made of metal bars, perched on a concrete block splattered with graffiti. Creed glanced back towards the street. Justine was still standing by the Porsche. He moved closer to the statue, the grass making dry whispers as he strode through it. Under the layers of graffiti there was a metal plaque with writing embossed on it. He bent down so he could read it.

The grass around the concrete block was so thick that he didn’t see the kid at first.

A skinny white teenager was sprawled on the ground with a rucksack between his knees. His shoulders were propped against the concrete block and his head was at an odd angle. He was so still Creed was wondering if he was dead when the kid suddenly opened his eyes and looked up at him.

‘You buying?’ said the kid.

‘Depends what you’re selling,’ said Creed.

‘Let me put it like this. Pills. Potions. All manner of medications to ease the pain of living.’

‘What sort of pills, exactly?’

The kid sat up, drawing his rucksack up close to his chest and hugging it there. ‘Let me put it like this, friend. Do you know about magic?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘Do you know about witches?’ The kid grinned crazily up at Creed. There was a swishing sound in the darkness behind them and both Creed and the kid turned to see Justine standing there, half hidden in the inky shadow of the statue.

‘A little,’ she said.

The skinny kid grinned at her. ‘Do you know that some witches are men?’

‘Sure.’

‘Do you know what they call one of those?’

‘Warlock.’

The kid swivelled his head and looked at Creed, grinning. ‘You buying?’ he said.

Creed reached into his jacket and took out his wallet. The EC paper money looked quaint and phony compared to US dollars. Play money. He took out a handful of it and held it out in the moonlight. ‘What will this buy me?’

The kid opened his rucksack and delved inside. There was a rustling sound as he drew out a cellophane pack with white tablets bubble-wrapped inside.

The kid ripped a strip of them off, tearing along a line of perforations.

Creed took the strip from the kid and examined it. Each tablet had a small crescent moon embossed on it. Suddenly he could smell the familiar liquorice smell riding on the night air. He repressed the impulse to tear the packet open and swallow a pill right now.

‘The slender moon seal of approval. The finest kind,’ said the kid. ‘And buying it here on this site of power will only add to the potency of the drug.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ said Creed. ‘But if these turn out to be ulcer tablets or aspirin I’m going to come looking for you. And then you’ll need some medicine to ease the pain of living, all right.’

‘No worries,’ said the kid. He stood up from the long grass and leaned against the statue, brushing his clothes off. He looked at Justine then grinned at Creed. ‘Very beautiful lady.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Is she for sale?’

‘Why don’t you ask me?’ said Justine.

‘Are you for sale?’

‘No.’

‘Not yet, anyway,’ said the kid, grinning through ragged teeth.

Creed turned away from the statue, wading through the long grass back towards the car. Justine turned and walked with him. Creed noticed that she was staying close at his side. The kid followed them, slinging his rucksack over his shoulder. ‘Anything else I can do for you people?’

‘Perhaps.’ Justine glanced back at him. ‘Do you sell information?’

‘If I answer that question, it’s information already. I’ll have to charge you for it.’

‘Here’s the question I really want answered,’ said Justine. ‘I’m looking for an old friend. She used to live around here and I wonder if you know where she is.’

‘What’s she called?’

‘Mrs Woodcott.’

The kid froze. They were almost back at the pavement and he was staring at the Porsche parked there. Before Creed could grab him he turned and bounded through the thick dry grass, running like a rabbit, his rucksack swinging on his back. He dodged around the statue, through the grass on the far side and back onto the sidewalk of the adjacent road. They heard his feet hit the pavement, running fast.

Creed turned back to Justine, angry and frustrated. ‘It was the car,’ he said.

‘Everybody knows the damned thing’s a police model. He thought we were 209

going to bust him.'

Justine wasn't listening. She was staring at a group of figures standing silently on the far side of the road. There were three of them, all women judging by their height. They were dressed in strange costumes and looked unearthly in the glow of the streetlamp. It took a moment for Creed to recognize the clothes they were wearing. Nuns. Roman Catholic nuns.

'What the hell are they doing here?'

Justine didn't take her eyes off the nuns.

'Is this a Buñuel movie?' said Creed, but she didn't reply. Now two of the nuns had turned away to enter a small building, one of the surviving original Edwardian houses, directly across the road from the statue. The third nun remained standing, looking at Justine, as if she was unnerved by the girl's stare. Justine suddenly shook her head and turned away. She looked at Creed.

'What's wrong?' he said.

'Nothing.' Justine shook her head again. 'They just looked so weird.' The third nun had followed her friends into the house now and the street was empty except for a lone taxi clattering past.

'They sure did. What are they doing around here?'

'That's a convent.' Justine pointed to the house across the road. She still seemed shaken.

'You're kidding.'

'No. There were a number of religious orders established here after the riots. They're supposed to help heal the community.'

'Well, they haven't had much impact on the presence of drug dealers. Are you okay?'

Justine nodded. 'It's just weird coming back here. All the memories.'

'You don't look too good.'

Justine shrugged. 'I'm a bit tired and hungry. Hungry mostly.'

'Come on,' said Creed. 'I've got an idea.'

They drove east then south, coming onto the Euston Road near Marylebone.

Justine helped navigate them down Tottenham Court Road and across Oxford Street. The traffic on Charing Cross Road was a nightmare but Creed had spent half his life driving in New York. He got down to the Mall in ten minutes and found a restricted parking place outside the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

'You can't park here.'

'This is a police Porsche. No one's going to clamp it.'

'Well, where are we going?'

Creed smiled at her. 'This may be my first time in London but I'm not a total hick. I've heard of a restaurant around here.'

'Wait a minute.' Justine got out of the car after Creed. 'You have to be kidding.'

'You've guessed the place I'm talking about, then?'

'You're not thinking of going to Dewer's, are you?'

'Bingo,' said Creed. He unlocked the trunk of the Porsche.

'But we can't.'

'How come? You're hungry, aren't you?' He bent down and looked inside the trunk, the red emergency light giving his face a satanic cast.

'But they won't let us in.'

'Why not?'

'The King eats there.'

'Well I'm sure he won't object to sharing the restaurant with us.' Creed reached into the trunk and shifted a long object in a padded carrying case. It was an automatic riot gun. Just one of the gifts from the old Texan and IDEA.

Underneath the gun there was a zippered canvas carryall.

‘But it costs a fortune.’

Creed unzipped the canvas bag. ‘We’ve got a fortune.’ He stood back and let Justine look into the bag. Inside were blocks of EC currency, virgin stacks of banknotes still sealed with treasury wire.

‘What are you doing with that?’

‘It’s in case I need to finance a big drug deal.’ Creed took one of the fat blocks of banknotes out and twisted the wire off it. He pocketed the money.

‘But I don’t see why we can’t buy dinner with some of it.’

Justine rubbed the frayed thigh of her jeans. ‘I’m not dressed to go into a place like that.’

Creed took a second block of money out of the bag. ‘Fine,’ he said, locking the trunk. ‘We’ll just have to go shopping first.’

On their way back from the shops they returned to the car so Justine could dump a designer bag containing her old clothes. The use of cash in some of London’s elite clothes stores had raised a few eyebrows but no one actually objected. ‘They probably think it’s drug money,’ said Creed. ‘Ironically enough.’

They walked up the steps to Pall Mall, with Justine stopping to lean on Creed at the top so she could slip out of her old sneakers and step into her new shoes.

She put the sneakers into a black silk bag and slung it across her shoulder.

She was dressed all in black, from her Prada culottes to the low-cut Hamnett halter and the leather jacket by Ladysmith. She felt good in her new clothes but she couldn’t help admiring Creed for still wearing the same battered denim jacket and khaki trousers he’d set off in. ‘There’s plenty of things 211

I’m scared of, but a dress code isn’t one of them,’ he said. ‘At the restaurant they’ll probably assume I’m too rich to give a shit.’ He looked at Justine as they strolled along St James’s Street. ‘Especially if I’m with you.’

Dewer’s Restaurant consisted of a large open floor with a semicircular bar spanning one wall and a raised podium with an eight-piece jazz

band seated on it in the middle of the floor. Before they started playing, the musicians wandered around the tables shaking hands with the diners. It was a custom which had originated out of a need to prove that the band wasn't just a hologram.

Their waitress was a beautiful redhead who hadn't bothered having her freckles surgically erased. She told them that the King wasn't in this evening.

But the restaurant was just a short drive from the palace and he usually dined there on Thursdays. Some nights he arrived in an armoured limousine with a motorcade. Other times he turned up driving himself in an anonymous car with just one aide.

Creed ordered champagne and the lights dimmed as the band began to play.

'"Take the A-Train",' said Creed.

'Duke Ellington,' said Justine.

'Billy Strayhorn, actually,' said Creed. 'Not that you need to know who wrote it to enjoy it.'

'Do you know a lot about jazz?'

'That's how come I've heard of this place. It's famous throughout the world.'

A spotlight flashed off a saxophone then meandered through the darkened restaurant, highlighting a group at a table then moving onto another. It settled for a moment on a cluster of tables where a group of well-dressed men and women were listening with great attention to a small man with a thin moustache. He wore a dark suit, a red tie and a red flower in his lapel. Something in the tension of their bodies suggested that they were very eager not to displease the small man.

Justine leaned closer to Creed. 'Our waitress was wrong. The King is in tonight.'

'What do you mean?'

'That's Paulie Keaton. The King of Crime. They say he runs all the gangs in London.'

The small man finished telling his story and everyone at the

surrounding tables laughed loudly and promptly. The spotlight moved on.

‘You sound like you know him.’

‘Almost. He once lived in a squat on the same estate as me, when he was just a kid. He started out selling joints and swiping car stereos.’

‘He seems to have done pretty well since then.’

‘Even in those days people were scared of him. When another kid started working on his patch, breaking into cars, Paulie almost whipped him to death 212

with a radio aerial. He’d do anything to get what he wanted.’

‘These overachievers always mystify me,’ said Creed.

The spotlight wandered back to the podium where the piano player started a solo. The red-haired waitress brought the champagne and Creed said he’d open it himself. She stood waiting by the table in case of disaster but Creed stripped the foil off the bottle and neatly popped the cork with his thumbs.

The waitress clapped and retreated politely. Creed grinned and poured a glass.

He handed it to Justine.

‘No thanks.’

‘Oh, come on, what’s wrong with a little champagne?’

‘It passes across the placenta.’

Creed set the bottle down and looked at her carefully. ‘Really?’

‘I’m in my third month. Pretty soon I’ll swell up like a balloon. You’d better put that bottle back in the ice bucket before it gets warm.’

They went to the kitchen to watch the chef select the ingredients for their meal. Then the beautiful redhead escorted them back to the table with a silver tray of hors d’oeuvres. The band was playing a Yusef Lateef tune when their main course arrived and some couples from nearby tables were slowly dancing in a small wedge of bare floor at the centre of the bar.

Justine hadn't eaten in a long time and she wolfed her food down with greedy enthusiasm while Creed watched. 'You look like you're eating for two, all right,' he said approvingly. He was lingering on his third glass of champagne.

'Why don't you finish the bottle? Just because I can't drink, you don't have to slow down.'

'Not really my drug,' said Creed. 'Are you okay?'

Justine had half risen from her chair. She was leaning over the table, her hand braced against it as though she was afraid of toppling over. Her face was white. Creed stared around, looking for their waitress but the redhead had disappeared. 'What's wrong?'

'I don't know,' whispered Justine. 'I just feel very strange.' She held a hand to her belly, pale and bare below the black band of her Hamnett top. 'All of a sudden.'

'Can I get you something?'

'A glass of water, please.' Justine's voice was even fainter now. Creed had to lean close to hear her voice over the slow, lazy jazz.

'No problem.' Creed hurried, weaving between tables full of expensively dressed diners. A tall, heavily built man was coming the other way but he backed away to make room when he saw Creed coming. The bar was at the far end of the restaurant. He cut across the small dance floor, slipping between swaying couples and eased up to the bar beside two stunning Eurasian girls.

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'Can they get away with that?' said one of the girls. 'They can't just rent the orbit. Not if they shot down the satellite that was there before.'

'No one can prove they shot it down,' said the other girl. She and her friend turned to look at Creed as he ordered a glass of water from the bartender.

'What do you think?' said the first girl.

'I never watch television,' said Creed. The band was playing 'I Can't Get Started' as he went back across the dance floor. He could see their table as soon as he pushed through the mass of slowly circling

couples.

He could see Justine was gone.

When he got to the table his first thought was that she must have fled to the ladies' room. Their red-haired waitress hurried over with a worried expression on her face.

'Have you seen the girl I was with? She –'

'She asked me to give you a message, sir.'

'She what?'

'She said to tell you that she's gone. She said –' the waitress avoided Creed's gaze '– she said, how could you ever imagine she'd forget about her husband.'

Justine paid the taxi driver with some notes from Creed's stash. When they were shopping she'd lied to him about the price of the jacket and pocketed the difference.

On their spree she had chosen each item of clothing with great care. The jacket had a lot of pockets, was warm and would protect her skin if, say, she had to get out of a car while it was moving in slow traffic and break her fall with a roll. The culottes were loose and practical, good for running in. The shoes were useless for moving quickly, but she'd slipped her sneakers back on under the table while they were eating dessert.

The halter top she'd just bought because she liked it.

As the taxi pulled away she took a moment to get her bearings in the dark street. The driver had dropped her off at almost exactly the spot where they'd first parked. She could see the statue in the long grass on its patch of waste-ground and, across the road beyond it, the small Roman Catholic convent.

Justine knew what she was doing. Soon she would get down to Kent and find the Doctor and Ace. And together they would rescue Vincent. Just like they had once before, a long time ago.

But first she had one thing to do.

She hurried through the long grass towards the statue. Moonlight shone through the tortured metal form of it. She was stepping around

the wide concrete plinth when she heard the voice.

‘Hello, beautiful.’

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The skinny kid was standing there with the rucksack slung over his shoulder. But this time he wasn’t alone. On either side of him stood Japanese teenagers, a boy and a girl, wearing cycle shorts and baggy T-shirts, brightly hand-painted.

‘I was hoping you might come back here,’ said the white kid. Justine was watching the Japanese teenagers. She recognized the emblems on their T-shirts; things had changed since she lived around here, but they hadn’t changed that much. The Yakuza were still part of London’s rich ethnic mix.

‘I’m waiting here for my friend,’ said Justine, choosing her words carefully.

The kid was looking at the Japanese boy. ‘I told you she was pretty, didn’t I?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the Japanese girl. ‘If she wasn’t, our surgeons could make her pretty.’

‘You remember?’ said Justine desperately. ‘You met him.’

‘Yeah, but she’s healthy, right?’ said the kid to the Japanese girl. ‘You can’t fake healthy.’

‘We’ll see,’ said the girl.

‘He’ll be here any minute,’ said Justine.

The Japanese boy spoke for the first time. ‘In that case we’d better take you away immediately.’

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Chapter 27

‘Is she all right?’

Dieter poured another glass of wine and glanced at Maxine. She noticed that his hands were shaking slightly. ‘Are you questioning my judgement?’ he snapped.

‘All I’m saying is maybe you should maintain Pam on the sedatives a little while longer.’

‘She doesn’t need sedation, she needs distraction.’ Dieter sipped his wine and walked over to the billiard table which practically filled the games room.

He began to arrange the coloured balls on the green felt. ‘Pam has opted to throw herself into her work. Personally I feel that is a good thing.’

Not to mention a profitable one, thought Maxine. But she didn’t say that.

Instead she said, ‘But Tommy is dead. She’s lost her brother. That must be an incredible blow.’

Dieter picked up his glass. ‘We all have our own disasters to cope with.

Personally I have to invite the coroner over from Canterbury and discuss the matter of a tragic electrical accident. Fortunately I know the lady and I’m sure she can deal with the matter with the minimum of publicity and police involvement.’ Dieter drained his wine. ‘Simultaneously I have the problem of concealing the living bodies of three apparently brain-dead young people and keeping them in good health until I can arrange for their sale to a reputable organ bank. And now of course there is this.’ Dieter’s gaze was strangely unfocused and Maxine realized he wasn’t looking at her. Instead he was staring over her shoulder at the row of large black plastic bags that stood along the wall of the games room. Each bag was carefully sealed with twists of wire but Maxine thought she could still faintly detect the smell.

‘There isn’t a single dry cleaner’s open until tomorrow morning,’ said Dieter.

His voice was steady but his hands were more shaky than ever as he refilled his glass again. ‘I hope Pam finds a suitable use for that filthy dog.’

Maxine didn’t reply. She stood at the window of the games room, staring across the dark farmyard towards the lights of the laboratory complex.

The laboratory was ablaze with light.

Pam had switched on every lamp in the place, including the ones in the annexe, which she'd replaced as soon as she arrived. The stretch of floor where 217

Tommy had been found had dried now and Pam made a point of walking back and forth across it a few times on minor errands.

Now she sat on a lab stool with a remote control in one hand and a mug in the other. The mug contained strong black coffee; it looked like it was going to be a long night and Pam wanted her wits about her. She could still feel the faint tremor of the tranquillizers Dieter had dosed her with earlier.

'This is the part,' said Pam. 'Watch carefully now.' She aimed the remote control and pressed a button. On the far side of the laboratory the image on the screen of the TV steadied and began moving at normal speed. Pam glanced over her shoulder. 'There,' she said. 'Did you hear that? Let me play it again for you.' She used the remote to rewind and increase the volume.

The TV screen showed Ace, Shell and Jack strapped in their dentist's chairs in the barn. None of the figures moved or gave any sign of life. 'Here we go,'

said Pam. She aimed the remote again and the sound on the TV increased steeply. There was a thunderous crash. None of the three in the chairs reacted to it. 'That's the door opening,' said Pam. 'If you listen carefully you can hear footsteps. Tommy's footsteps. Why would Tommy want to come into the barn during the warlock experiment?' Pam looked over her shoulder again. 'That's what we're about to find out. Now listen.' She turned back to the television.

There was a loud electric buzzing sound coming from the screen. 'There,' said Pam. 'That's the motor on the trolley. Tommy left the trolley in the room with the test subjects. And what was on the trolley?'

Pam switched off the television and swivelled on her stool to face the lab bench. Behind her were five cages. 'You were,' said Pam.

In the cages were three cats and two dogs. Pam sipped her coffee and stared at them. 'Anyone listening to me talking to animals might think I'm mad,' she said. 'Or, to be more generous, temporarily unhinged by grief. The result of a recent bereavement.' Pam glanced at the far corner of the lab where bright light flooded out from the annexe. 'But they'd be wrong, wouldn't they?'

One of the cats, a small ginger creature, yowled at her, pushing a tentative paw between the bars of its cage. Pam ignored it. ‘I have a theory,’ she said.

‘I’ve been doing some reading about this drug called warlock.’ She got up from her stool and went over to the sink area where a jug full of coffee sat on a heating unit. She poured herself a fresh mug, paused to add milk from the refrigerator and returned to her stool. She blew on the coffee and looked at the animals on the bench.

‘It seems that warlock has a number of highly unusual effects on human consciousness. We’re primarily concerned with just one of these. The exteri-orization of inner thought processes. There are numerous well-documented examples of subjects who projected emotional states onto other humans when dosed with warlock. These projected states often amounted to a shared alter-218

native reality. Mass hysteria, if you prefer. At least, that’s the verdict in most of the stuffier scientific literature.’ Pam sipped carefully at her coffee, found that it had cooled sufficiently and took a large swallow.

‘Another aspect which receives short shrift from experts is the reported incidence of telepathy. Subjects claim to be able to read each other’s minds when given a sufficiently large dose of the drug. Even more outrageous, according to the authorities, are stories of personality transmigration.’ Pam frowned at the animals in their cages.

‘Possession, you might call it. The body of one person being invaded by the soul of another.’

The laboratory was silent except for the sound of the compressor in the refrigerator. Pam leaned forward, resting her elbows on the lab bench. The animals stared out of their cages at her. ‘These are the facts. First and most important, my brother is dead. I don’t believe that was an accident. Nor do I believe it was an accident that several animals managed to escape shortly before or after his death. Or murder, as I prefer to call it.’

One of the dogs made a faint whine and edged back in its cage under Pam’s unwavering stare. ‘My brother was murdered,’ she said. ‘That is a fact. What is also a fact is that we have three human test subjects whose personalities and intelligence seem to have abandoned them. We also have a group of animals who have been behaving in a quite remarkable fashion, exhibiting behaviour and thought processes far

beyond anything normal. Now, none of this seems to have penetrated to my colleagues. I suspect that deep inside their minds they have formulated a suspicion similar to mine, only to discard it. Which is understandable, when you consider what an extraordinary notion it is. But the true scientist must be prepared to consider the extraordinary.' Pam rose from her stool. 'I have a theory. And I intend to test it.'

Pam went back to the sink and selected a clean paper filter. She fitted it into the funnel and placed it in the neck of the jug. She went to the fridge and took out a sealed foil container of coffee, spooned the aromatic powder into the filter and began heating water for a fresh pot. She began automatically preparing a second cup for Tommy when memory came rushing in. Tommy wasn't here any more. Only last night they had been playing backgammon together and Tommy had won five pounds off her. Pam had refused to pay up.

She claimed that they hadn't agreed to play for money but they had and she knew it. Pam wished she could give the five quid to Tommy now. She wished there was some secret tree stump she could stuff it into on a dark night then come back next morning to find it gone and know that Tommy had got it.

Pam spooned coffee into her cup with trembling hands. Then she went back to the bench and took a pair of heavy animal handling gloves out of a drawer.

She kept an eye on the cages as she slipped them on, her hands gradually 219

steadying.

'Now, if my theory is correct, three human minds have found their way into animal bodies.' She flexed her fingers in the heavy blue gloves and turned to the cages. 'And yet there are five of you. Which means that there is a forty per cent chance that I am about to begin experimenting on an ordinary animal.

A forty per cent chance that you humans will survive the first test procedure.'

Pam smiled a thin smile. 'An interesting notion, isn't it?'

Then she opened one of the cages, took out an animal and set to work.

Chapter 28

Creed walked through the beaded curtain that separated the bathroom from the small bedroom. There was a faded rug on the green linoleum floor, a battered pine dresser, two mismatched chairs and the sagging double bed with its fake brass frame.

The room had been rented to him by a Cypriot couple who had been eating supper in the back room and watching some Euro-soap on the TV when he arrived. Their tiny stucco-fronted establishment was located three streets across from the patch of waste ground with the statue. It was the nearest hotel, and that was its only attraction.

As soon as he received Justine's message Creed had run out of the restaurant looking for her. He was much too late. She had already found a passing taxi and vanished.

Creed had wondered for a moment where Justine had got the money, but there had been plenty of opportunities for her to pocket some when they were shopping.

He'd gone back inside Dewer's and settled his bill, the red-haired waitress flashing him a look of sympathy, and then walked slowly back to his Porsche in the Mall. There was no urgency now because he had no idea where to go.

Operating on instinct he'd driven north again, getting onto the Euston road and heading for Marylebone. Navigating mostly by memory he eventually returned to the Bayswater street corner with its statue and convent.

Truth to tell, it was the only place he knew in London.

But the street had been quiet and empty, the only sign of life a lone cat prowling through the long grass on the patch of waste ground. At that point he'd simply given up, parked the car in a cobbled mews and checked into the nearest fleabag hotel.

Now Creed wandered to the window of his third-floor room and forced it slowly open, decades of sloppily applied paint shrieking in protest. He wedged it in place and leaned out to breathe the cool night air, staring at the rooftops of London. Justine was still out there somewhere.

If he didn't find her the whole mission was over and it would be his fault.

Creed tried to decide how he felt about that. It would mean dismissal from IDEA and he might even get kicked off the force. He couldn't begin to imagine what life would be like without his job. He doubted that he would last long.

In an odd way, staying on the police force had seemed to keep Anna alive.

Or at least, prevent her death from becoming absolute and final. If he had to quit they might as well zip him up in a body bag with her.

'That's a healthy attitude,' Creed said, speaking aloud in the empty room and smiling for the first time since Justine had escaped.

He went over to the bed where he'd dumped his luggage. He'd brought it up from the car in two trips, riding up in the tiny cage elevator with its flickering light-bulb. The old Cypriot woman had given him an odd look when she'd seen the long wrapped shape of the riot gun but she hadn't said anything.

Creed sat on the bed. He moved the gun aside and looked at the other bags.

His suitcase, the canvas holdall full of cash, and the boutique shopping bag Justine had left in the back seat.

He reached into that bag and drew out the first thing he touched. A scrap of white cotton. Creed smiled again. On their tour of the shops he'd even bought her new underwear. He emptied the rest of the clothes out of the bag.

Threadbare jeans, socks, a bra and a long-sleeved shirt spilled out onto the bed. The scent of Justine lingered on the clothes. He was surprised at the strength of the memories triggered by her smell.

Creed went back to the window and stared out at the London skyline. She was out there somewhere and he had to find her. But how?

A sudden cold wind swept up from the street and blew through the window. In an instant it seemed that autumn was over and winter was bearing inexorably down on the city. Creed had taken his shirt off in the bathroom and now the air chilled his skin. He shivered and turned away from the window. His jacket was hung over the back of a chair and he put it on to warm himself up. As he dug his hands into the

pockets he found himself clutching something.

The cellophane-wrapped roll of pills.

Creed smiled. He tore the packaging open and the liquorice smell was there instantly, like an old friend in the room. Creed swallowed a tablet.

He hesitated for a moment and then took a second and third.

Creed went to the sagging bed and lay down on it. The springs of the mattress creaked under his weight. A white fragment of feather drifted off the pillow, stirred by his breath, spinning up into the air. He watched it spin lazily in slow motion, up past the faded rose wallpaper, up towards the cluster of halogen bulbs in the cracked ceiling plaster.

Creed rolled to one side. Justine's discarded clothes were in a bundle pressed close to his face. He could smell her on the cotton and the smell aroused him. From where he was lying now he could stare out of the window at a luminous rectangle of city sky and rooftops. She was out there somewhere.

He'd find her.

* * *

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'Do you understand what's happened to you?'

'Yes. I've been kidnapped,' said Justine.

'You have been recruited,' corrected the teenage Japanese boy. 'One of our agents noticed you. We circulate lists of certain physical types we require at any given time. We have a high turnover of girls.'

'Like any knocking-shop.' Justine thought she noticed a faint flush of anger on the boy's face. 'I know about this place,' she told him, hoping to cut through the bullshit. 'Paulie Keaton runs it.'

'Mr Keaton is a very notable businessman with diverse interests.'

'Who runs this place, which is just a knocking-shop.'

'This is a high quality establishment,' said the boy.

‘Which started out in the back of a lorry behind the Nightingale Estate in Clapton.’ Justine leaned back on the layered cotton of the futon. The ‘establishment’ looked like a classic Japanese home. She and the teenage boy were sitting cross-legged on the floor in a clean bare room furnished with just a low table and the futon. Light from a paper-shaded lamp glowed on the wooden floor.

‘In any case, this is the situation,’ said the Japanese boy. ‘You will have, on average, between five and fifteen customers a day. Weekends and public holidays are less busy unless there is a major sporting fixture taking place.

If you ever have less than three customers a day we will begin to debit your account at a fixed rate. As an incentive to improve your throughput.’

‘“Throughput”,’ said Justine.

‘You will be routinely monitored for venereal infections and we provide a comprehensive medical package. Your cubicle will be monitored.’

Justine glanced up and saw the camera in the corner of the white ceiling, watching them.

‘And if a client becomes violent,’ continued the Japanese boy, ‘our security staff will be there to help. All events that take place in the cubicle are recorded and, at our discretion, may receive satellite syndication. You will receive a fixed royalty for any such broadcast. These royalties and your share of the client’s fee will go into a Benelux bank account. Providing of course that you show a profit after our deductions for room rental, meals, security and medical care.’

‘And how likely is that?’

‘Most girls manage to work off their debts within six to eight months, providing they maintain a suitably high throughput and avoid incurring medical or other debts.’

Justine nodded, not really looking at the boy. She looked casually around the room, trying to find a way out. The walls of the room looked like sliding paper screens but Justine knew that they were made of some extremely 223

durable plastic that could be locked into place.

Although the room appeared elegant, clean and welcoming it was actually a prison. At least for the girl who worked here. The customers could come and go as they pleased. With forty or fifty rooms like this in the building Justine estimated that the Japanese boy and his employers must be making a turnover of nearly a quarter of a million pounds a week.

One of the panels slid open and the Japanese girl came in. She was carrying some sheets of elegant, heavy handmade notepaper with computer printout on them. The boy took the papers from her and read them carefully. The girl paused and picked up a bag containing Justine's clothes. Her new clothes.

They'd made her change into a pair of cream-coloured silk pyjamas when she arrived. Justine watched the girl walk out with the bag containing her clothes. She remembered shopping for them with Creed, just a few hours ago.

She wished Creed was here now. Justine wished she'd never run away from him. 'What's that?' she said, trying to keep her voice casual. But it sounded thin and strained, even to herself.

The boy frowned as he flipped through the sheets. 'The results of that medical examination we gave you when you first arrived.'

'Any problems?' said Justine. Her voice trembled this time.

'No. No problems,' said the boy. He rose gracefully to his feet and smiled at her. 'You are pregnant of course. But our medical staff will be back in a few hours and then we'll get rid of the baby for you.'

Justine heard his words echoing in her head. She felt her stomach turn over. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

Then suddenly she heard the gentle whisper of the panel sliding open again.

Her heart leapt. Someone stepped into the room behind her. Justine

felt a sudden fierce blind faith that deliverance had arrived. She was saved. Creed had come to rescue her.

The baby was saved.

She turned around, already smiling, to greet Creed.

It wasn't Creed. It was a small man with a thin moustache that looked as if it had been drawn on his upper lip with an eyebrow pencil. He was dressed in an expensive-looking charcoal suit and red tie. A red flower blossomed in his lapel.

'Hello,' said Paulie Keaton. 'I understand you know me.'

Justine tried to answer but her mouth was dry. She couldn't force any words out.

'I was just visiting, inspecting my operation and I saw you on the monitor.'

He nodded at the camera in the corner of the ceiling. 'I heard what you said.

Apparently you knew me. Back when I was a lad. Back on the Nightingale Estate.'

Suddenly Justine found her voice. But she didn't speak immediately. Instead she stood up. Instantly the Japanese boy was tense, on guard. But Justine merely knelt on the floor in front of Paulie Keaton.

'I'll do anything,' she said, staring up at him. 'Please save my baby.'

Paulie rested a gentle hand on her head. 'You're right, you know. I did start my business in the back of a lorry.' Paulie's eyes clouded with nostalgia. He seemed lost in thought for a moment then he came out of the reverie and smiled down at Justine.

'But I don't like being reminded of all that,' he said. 'And I don't like anyone calling this place a knocking-shop.' He turned to the Japanese boy.

'Kill her baby,' said Paulie Keaton. 'Then put her to work in the heavy S&M

section.'

Chapter 29

‘I don’t like this,’ said Sean.

‘It would be pretty surprising if you did.’ Maxine finished changing the catheter on the inert body of the tattooed girl and went over to join Sean at the sink.

‘No, I don’t mean that.’ Sean handed the soap to Maxine and dried his hands on a paper towel. ‘Changing the drips and the catheters and that. What I don’t like is *them*. The way they are.’

‘I know exactly what you mean,’ said Maxine. As she washed her hands she found herself half turned, awkwardly angling her face so she could keep an eye on Ace and Shell and Jack.

The three bodies sat slackly in the chairs. They were utterly motionless but Maxine didn’t like having her back to them. Rationally, she knew there was no chance of any of them moving a finger, let alone standing up. But on a more primitive level she didn’t want to let them out of her sight. The thought of having them behind her, unwatched, caused the hairs on the back of her head to stir.

‘It’s like going into a department store.’ she said. ‘And out of the corner of your eye you see someone standing there. But you know there’s something a bit weird about this person. And then you turn and look at them and you realize it isn’t a person at all. It’s a clothes dummy.’

‘That’s it,’ said Sean. ‘That’s it exactly.’ He had wandered back over to the chairs and stood studying the motionless bodies.

‘Do you think it was a good idea taking the straps off them?’

‘Dieter insisted. He’s keen on the idea of selling them for biostock. Doesn’t want bedsores to damage the goods. We’re going to have to roll them over tomorrow.’

‘Maybe they’ll wake up again,’ said Maxine.

‘I doubt it.’

‘How do we know?’

‘Dieter seems pretty sure.’

‘Well, I’m not so sure about Dieter any more,’ said Maxine.

‘Our fearless leader,’ snorted Sean. ‘Yeah. He’s starting to lose it a bit. Is he still upset about his clothes?’

‘Upset is putting it mildly. When I left him in the games room he’d given up on the wine and started knocking back brandies.’

‘And what about Pam? Is she really up and about?’

‘Up and about and busy.’

‘Busy, eh?’ Sean grinned crookedly. ‘I’m glad I’m not an animal in the lab tonight.’

The smell of coffee. Chick’s earliest memory was of the smell of coffee. He was born in the kitchen of the house on Allen Road with Ace and the Doctor in attendance and someone had put on the coffee as they stayed up with his mother on their late-night vigil. So coffee was the first smell to hit the keen nose of the newborn kitten.

Chick’s next memory was ingrained deep in his muscles. A memory of washing. The ritual of cleansing himself was programmed deep in his cat psyche. It was a habit interwoven with all the other behaviour of his life. His other early amorphous memories were of his mother gently washing him with her rough, thorough tongue. And then, through play and example, gradually learning to wash himself.

Chick hated being dirty. Washing was a duty and a joy and a ritual which gave meaning to his life. In recent months he had taken to joining Ace when she went to have her bath. The small ginger cat would prowl the rim of the big white tub, occasionally reaching a tentative paw out to test the trembling surface of the water that boiled into the bath and rose around Ace’s knees.

The occasional plunging accident had taught him that the surface of the water wouldn’t support even a small cat, no matter how carefully he settled his paws onto it or how quickly he tried to sprint across it.

This was a nuisance because Chick wanted very much to join Ace as she sat there so smug and content in the warmth of the tub.

So he prowled the smooth white enamel ledge of the bath, yowling as he circled Ace and water thundered from the taps. Eventually the

water would stop – its cessation somehow mysteriously linked to Ace twisting the taps –

and he'd settle down to sit beside the shampoo bottles and keep an eye on the girl while she bathed.

There were many things about Ace, and about human behaviour generally, which chick found baffling. But when Ace raised her brown limbs out of the water and soaped and rubbed them, Chick understood exactly what was going on. The girl was washing herself. And as he watched, fascinated by the ritual of sponge and soap and cloth, he'd lift a nonchalant paw and lick it and begin casually rubbing it across his head, washing himself.

Chick took great pride in washing. Ever since he'd been a kitten small enough to sit in Ace's hand he'd taken responsibility for himself, endlessly 228

grooming his glossy fur.

Chick wished he could wash himself now. He lay on the laboratory bench in a puddle of his own vomit and moaned.

Pam heard the moan and went back over to the cat. She took his small head in her left hand and Chick turned, slowly and painfully, trying to reach her with his mouth.

He strained, opened his jaws, and managed to lick her.

How odd. Pam thought she might more reasonably have expected him to try and bite her. The battery of tests she'd just put the little cat through had been demanding in the extreme. Now he lay on the bench, his fur clotted and streaked with vomit, his once proud whiskers matted and filthy. Pam repressed a feeling of disgust at the way the cat looked.

She could wash the work surface off easily enough. But there wasn't any point cleaning up just yet. Pam had several more test subjects to deal with.

She held the cat's tiny head firmly in place with her left hand. In the right she held a syringe. She slid the needle neatly into the flesh under the rounded fur of his haunch. Chick hardly made a sound as the needle went in. Compared to the ordeal he'd been put through in the last hour, the pain of the syringe was nothing.

And also the sensation had reminded him of something. Something comforting.

Chick remembered this sharp thorn-prick sensation. He'd felt it before when the Doctor or Ace or Benny had taken him to the place of many animals and another woman in a white coat had stood him on a table and stabbed him with a thorn. Always on those occasions Chick had been ill and the thorn had made him better. All the indignities and pains he'd experienced in that place had been for his own good.

So, this must be for his own good too. Chick thought he must have been ill without knowing it. All the horrible pains he'd just endured must have been done to him out of love, not hate.

These thoughts gave the small ginger cat comfort as the sharp thorn penetrated him and sent a steady spreading coldness through his hindquarters.

Chick relaxed. If he had the strength he might have purred. He closed his eyes. The woman in the white coat was making him well. He would wake up, happy and healthy.

He would chase the elusive grey mice in the attic again. Prowl moonlit walls again and defend his territory in fierce battles. Spring out of nowhere in ambush onto the stupid Siamese and scare it out of its wits.

Soon. Soon he'd run free again.

He just wished he had the strength to clean himself. Chick hated being dirty.

Pam withdrew the syringe and watched as the cat shuddered and died.

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Under normal circumstances she wouldn't have wasted an injection. The ginger cat was quite small and she could easily have 'benched' him the way she would a rabbit: swing him by the hind legs and smash his head smartly against the edge of the bench, killing him instantly. But the cat was covered with puke and swinging him around would have proved very messy. So she'd chosen the syringe instead.

Pam used a folded newspaper to jab the little body to the edge of the work surface and roll it over the side into a metal bin. She didn't bother carrying the bin through to the incinerator. She wasn't finished

yet.

Pam turned back to the four remaining animals in their cages. The two dogs and two cats, one black and one white. They watched her as she approached.

To Pam's astonishment, one of the cats was purring.

All her life Shell had wanted flawless white skin, but her body had betrayed her. At puberty she found wiry dark hair flourishing under her arms and between her legs and her face became scorched with red acne.

The milky white body of a princess had proved to be a dream that would never come true. Knowing this was so, she had taken a bitter pleasure in covering herself with the permanent stains of tattoos.

But now Shell's body was a smooth, perfect white at last.

She stretched a paw out towards the bars of her cage and admired it, licking carefully at it to clean her fur. She ignored the sights and sounds that were taking place in the laboratory in front of her. Instead she took refuge deep in the wild jungle of the new mind where she had found herself.

When the real world became too much Shell always had a tendency to turn away from it and flee. She'd been a moody, solitary child who'd retreated into picture books or gone to bed in the middle of the day, waiting for the vivid confusion of afternoon dreams to invade her sleeping mind.

As she'd grown older she'd discovered the meditation and breathing exercises of Buddhism and, later on, the easy exit of drugs.

Now, trapped in this cage, confronted with the brightly lit horrors of the laboratory, Shell sought refuge in meditation, and discovered that her cat mind was oddly suited to it. It was remarkably easy to set her thoughts swaying in a steady rhythm, detached from the world in a pleasant buzz.

Her mind began to knit itself into a blissful shimmer and she heard a strange warm sound that she gradually realized was coming from within herself.

She was purring. She was purring furiously, letting herself be carried away by the sensation. Shell had discovered that the purring of a cat

was breathing which had reached a rippling relaxed perfection, a kind of breathing Buddhist monks only begin to aspire to in their ritual exercises.

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Shell had never achieved nirvana, that ultimate state of harmonious abandonment of self which all meditation is aimed towards. But within a few moments of triggering her purring reflex she found herself transported into a realm of calmness and detachment that transcended all her fears.

This feeling she was experiencing now made nirvana sound like a cheap tourist destination.

So Shell sat in her cage, purring and grooming and admiring her own sleek white body, white beyond the dreams of a troubled child, as white as the coat of the woman who peered in through the bars of the cage at her.

Pam made herself turn away from the cages. For some odd reason, the purring of the cat disturbed her more than any amount of howling or complaint might have done. She washed her hands and prepared the instruments and the computer for the next series of experiments.

She debated working on a dog. But dealing with that first cat had set her mind working along a certain path and she had a number of interesting lines of investigation she wished to pursue. Using a dog would mean interrupting her train of thought and also preparing a different set of restraints, which would be a nuisance.

No, working on a dog could wait. She had plenty of time. She would use another cat next. Pam studied the animals. Two to choose between.

The white cat with its odd purring and the lithe black cat who eyed her with such fierce, green-eyed hostility.

Pam made her decision and opened the cage.

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Chapter 30

Creed was watching a feather. It floated above him as if it was defying gravity, spinning and rising. It would gradually begin to sink back

down towards his face, and then he would breathe out and the feather would float back up and begin its cycle again, its slow random tumbling linked to the rhythm of his breathing.

Creed felt that if he watched the feather long enough it would reveal a secret to him.

He lay on the battered mattress in his hotel room, feeling the warlock start to work on his mind, watching the feather and listening to the sounds around him.

There were voices echoing from the corridor. Three men were playing cards in the room opposite Creed's with their door open. Creed had picked up snatches of their conversation through the flimsy walls and he heard them complain that the radiator was jammed in the room. They had been banging on it, trying to turn it off but now they'd given up and opened the door for ventilation.

Down in the street below the Cypriot hotel owner and his wife were sitting on the steps, smoking and talking. Creed didn't understand the language but he could follow the emotional tone of the conversation from the rising and falling cadences.

The open window also brought him the sound of pop music from a radio in a nearby shop. Now and then a car whisked past in the street or a girl laughed somewhere or the bead curtain in his bathroom clattered in a stirring breeze from the window. The background to all this was a low murmur of city noise, a blend of every sound in London woven together. Cars, music, the subaudible breathing of millions.

Creed listened to it, knowing that buried somewhere in that mix was Justine's breathing. He could walk into a room somewhere and find her sitting there. It was just a matter of finding that room.

Creed's mind was streaming with sense impressions as the massive dose of warlock entered his bloodstream. The drug could lead him to Justine. He was confident of that. It was just a matter of finding the right approach.

Or letting the approach find him. He knew that rational conscious thought would only pump him up with anxiety and disrupt the strange flowering of 233

the drug in his brain.

So Creed lay on the bed listening to the breathing of the huge city

beyond his window. His own breath flowed out, spinning the feather above his eyes, adding to the great unheard murmur of London like a trickle of water flowing into the sea.

The rhythm and sound of his own breathing was mingling with Justine's somewhere out in that vast ocean.

Creed stared out of his window at the lights glowing against the dark blue square of night sky. Justine was out there somewhere and although she might not know it, they were reaching out at this moment and blindly touching each other.

He let his breath flow in and out of his lungs without conscious thought or interference. His mind eased away, releasing his body so it could just exist in the moment, free of the clenching grip of awareness.

Anxiety and intellect drifted away, leaving nothing but the unconscious natural core of his existence. Creed's heartbeat slowed into a smooth rhythm and his lungs opened and closed effortlessly until he felt as though the air was breathing him.

Smells flowed in and out of his nostrils and he registered them in a distant way, like a sea creature tasting the currents it swayed in. He breathed the smell of diesel, fried food, sweat and perfume lingering on the pillow by his face. Scented insecticide on a fly strip hanging from the ceiling. Damp and mould deep in the building. Justine's sweat and perfume.

Her clothing was bunched on the pillow beside him. He could smell her as if she had been asleep there by his side; as if she had only got out of bed a moment ago. He could smell her and smell his own body, the tang of anger and fear still on him. The scents of their bodies entangled like lovers.

The breeze rattled the beads in the bathroom doorway. In the room across the hall a man cleared his throat and cursed his luck with cards. On the doorstep below the voices of the Cypriot couple rose in vehement agreement about some unknown topic. A car alarm shrilled in a nearby street then abruptly cut off. The sound made Creed think of his own Porsche. It was parked in a cobbled mews a couple of blocks away. He looked out of the window, trying to determine where the mews was in relation to the hotel, but something was wrong.

The sky outside the window had changed colour. From a deep indigo it had paled to almost white. And instead of the bright random glow

of lights this white sky had pale red spots hovering on it, spaced at regular intervals.

The transformation of the sky astonished Creed, making his heart surge with terror. He closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. He had to let the drug show him whatever it wanted. He had to look at it without fear.

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As he thought this he was rewarded with an almost instant easing of his heartbeat. It slowed down gradually from its panic rhythm. Creed smiled. He had to let the drug show him what it wanted to show him. He made himself open his eyes again.

The sky was still white with the strange red patches on it. The red patches were oddly like roses and slowly Creed realised he wasn't looking out of the window at all.

He was staring at a patch of faded floral wallpaper.

But how could that be? From where he was lying on the bed he faced directly towards the window. Why was he suddenly face to face with the wall?

That was when Creed realized he was no longer on the bed. He was on his feet, standing on the other side of the room, leaning on the scarred pine bureau where he'd set his wallet and car keys, staring at the wallpaper a few inches from his nose.

He had no memory of getting up and crossing the room. But he must have done so. He turned around and saw the bed behind him and, beyond that, the open window with the night sky framed in it.

Once again he felt a tremendous rush of fear. Take it easy, he told himself.

His heart was hammering and sweat trickling down his spine. He looked at his hands, planted on either side of the old wooden bureau.

His own fingers looked odd to him; strange, thin, pinkish structures that flowed back into the fleshy pads of his hands and back from there into his wrists. He wondered how he could ever have believed they were part of his body. As he watched they moved like thin broken sea creatures, floating down to pick up his wallet and put it in his pocket. His heartbeat was still abnormally fast, racing loud in his ears.

Creed realized that all the sounds around him had abated. The voices of the gamblers across the hall, the Cypriot couple below, even the rattle of the bead curtain and the passing cars in the street seemed to be hanging in suspense.

Waiting and listening.

One of the card players cleared his throat again. The Cypriot woman spoke, a brief frightened monosyllable, and her husband hissed for her to be quiet.

The tense silence grew and Creed felt his body getting hot. He couldn't tell if the tension was coming into him from the world outside or if it was originating in him and spreading outwards into the world, infecting everything with his own anxiety.

The radio in the shop across the street kept playing, echoing tinnily in the suspended silence. Then it suddenly died as someone reached out and switched it off.

All the random sounds of the hotel – creak of staircase, slam of door, rattle 235

of old elevator – had ceased. It was as if the whole building, the whole street didn't dare make a sound. As if it was waiting for something.

Creed heard a car passing a few blocks away. It was getting closer for a moment, then it slowed and stopped. Even the more distant traffic murmur seemed to be growing gradually more quiet.

The room across the hallway was radiating uneasy stillness. There was no longer even the slap of cards on the table. The players had suspended their game. The silence had that peculiar strained quality of a group of people waiting for something to happen.

Creed realized that he was holding his breath. He forced himself to open his mouth and breathe slowly and deeply, letting the air into his lungs again.

He felt dizzy as the oxygen returned to his bloodstream.

Noises began again. Two kids started yelling at each other from a nearby street. A baby began to cry in a distant window. In the next room one of the gamblers cursed and moved a chair, scraping it across the floor. An engine buzzed raggedly as an air-conditioner came on somewhere.

The radio in the shop came on again, tentative and low at first, then rising in volume as a pounding pop song began. A breeze from the window swayed the beaded curtain behind Creed until it rattled like wooden wind-chimes.

It was as if the whole street had been holding its breath with him and had suddenly let it out again.

Creed went into the bathroom and wiped the sweat off his chest with a towel. He put his shirt on again and then his jacket. He took three fat blocks of money from the canvas bag then sat down on the bed and unpacked the riot gun.

It was a modular weapon, about the same size as a hunting rifle. But if you removed the magazine, the barrel extension and the extended grip you were left with an effective handgun. Creed sat for a moment, debating whether to take this or his Python with its MIDI link. In the end he put the pistol under his mattress and picked up the riot gun. He stripped it down, loaded it and put it into the modified inner pocket of his jacket.

The three men playing cards across the hall all dropped their gaze as he walked past their open door. The ancient cage elevator was busy creaking up to another floor so he took the stairs down. As he walked through the lobby the Cypriot woman was coming out of the narrow back room. She paused when she saw Creed, then she came hesitantly into the lobby.

Something glinted in her hand. It was a silver crucifix on a thin chain. She fastened it around her neck, staring at Creed as he went out of the door into the street.

* * *

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Creed let his feet do his thinking for him. He just wandered, his mind detached. Not concentrating, not worrying. He knew warlock would show him the way if he could just relax and allow it to.

His shadow stretched on the pavement in front of him, then shrank again as he passed under street lights. London was busy tonight. Taxis drove past, and cars full of young laughing people. Creed wandered without plan or destination, turning off from one street to another whenever it felt right. He followed his impulses, careful not to interfere with whatever the drug might show him.

It was now a pleasant, warm autumn night. He heard the sizzling of a street vendor's stall and smelled cooking meat. He listened to his footsteps creating their own rhythm, their own unique signature, and mixing with a million other city noises.

Creed let his thoughts drift. The warlock was still surging through his bloodstream, transforming everything. Coloured lights of shops and restaurants washed over him. He glimpsed passing faces watching him, strangers, their eyes shining with strange intelligence. Minds he would never know. Then the faces and lights became a blur. All his attention was on sound. The sound of his own footsteps clattering on the late-night streets.

The rhythm of this sound began to alter in some subtle way, becoming even more personal and urgent until finally he realized he was not listening to his footsteps but to his own heartbeat.

Creed had a sudden searing flash of memory. Anna in bed with him, face caught in a beam of moonlight. She was bending over his bare chest, her hair tickling his skin, grinning her crazy infectious grin so that her cheeks were baby-fat and rounded. 'I can hear your heartbeat,' she said, pressing her warm ear to his chest. 'Don't ever let it stop beating.' But it was Anna's heart that had stopped.

The memory passed away but it left Creed standing alone on this London street, the cold September wind pushing past him. Here he was in an alien city at night, surrounded by strangers. People looked at him as they hurried past. He was hunched over with a shocking physical ache. It felt like a huge bruise that ran from his navel up to his collar bone. It was most painful and tender directly over his heart.

Creed made himself start walking again, swinging his arms briskly, trying to shake off the aftershock of the memory.

But another memory was fighting its way into his consciousness. Creed resisted it. He knew it only promised more pain. He walked faster, swinging his arms harder. People on the sidewalk were looking at him oddly, moving away to let him pass.

But he couldn't move faster than the memory. As he strode along, swinging 237

his arms, it began to invade his mind. Any moment it would erupt full-blown into his consciousness. Creed fought against it. He tried to concentrate on his heart again, to recapture the intensity of that rhythmic sound which had filled his consciousness a moment ago.

There. He heard it. It was back.

But something was wrong.

The sound was changing. He could hear a strong steady beat, but it wasn't his heart.

Creed realized it was someone else's footsteps. This one sound stood out from all the city noises around him. Creed tried to ignore it but the harder he fought it the more it claimed his attention. It was as if his awareness made it louder, singling it out from the barrage of city background sounds.

The swift tip-tapping of a woman's footsteps. Creed realized that they were coming from just ahead of him. He looked up and, through a gap in the crowd, he saw her.

She was a small woman with dark hair hanging in short wings on either side of her head. But it was the way she walked that caught Creed's attention: she marched along swiftly, with great determination, one arm clutching a bag, the other arm swinging at her side, like a toy soldier.

It was an odd walk. It made Creed's heart turn over. It was Anna's walk.

The small girl paused at the street corner, waiting for the lights to change.

The green man showed and she crossed the street. The small body, the bird-like angle of her head as she watched the traffic, the swing of her hips, that marching gait.

It was Anna.

The lights were changing as Creed hurried to the street corner where she'd crossed. He stepped off the kerb but a shriek of rubber drove him back. A taxi driver made an obscene gesture at Creed as he came off his brakes and accelerated away. The traffic thickened, a solid wall of metal roaring past.

Creed waited until he saw a gap then sprinted across the road. On the other side of the road he paused. This street branched into two, like a Y. Anna could have gone either way.

Which direction to follow? Right or left? A crowd of pedestrians came

across the road and walked past him as he tried to make up his mind. He realized that the traffic lights had changed. He was wasting time. Which way?

Don't think about it, said a voice in his mind. Just let it happen.

Creed turned left. It was quiet residential street, moving away from the main thoroughfare.

Among the apartment houses there were occasional shops: a seedy-looking taxi office, a late-night launderette, two curry restaurants, and under a broad spreading autumn oak tree, a brightly lit café which

looked like the hang-out for the off-duty taxi drivers.

There were half a dozen cabs parked outside and a couple of men had the hood of one open, inspecting the engine and discussing it.

Creed found himself crossing the road and walking into the café. The bright lights hurt his eyes and for a moment he had trouble seeing.

'All right, love?' A girl smiled at him from a steaming coffee machine beyond the gleaming counter.

'Espresso,' said Creed. He paid and carried the small cup into the back of the café. The back room was dimly lit and more mellow than the brilliant front of the café. It was a long, rectangular room lined with booths and heavy with smoke and conversation.

The clientele in this place was mixed. In the front section it was mostly the taxi drivers and a sprinkling of other late-night workers. Through here, in the back room, there were still some taxi men but they were outnumbered by a younger, trendier crowd. Creed figured that the café had been discovered by the Bohemian set. At the table nearest Creed a young man in a beret was gesticulating angrily, making a point as he jabbed his cigarette in the air.

Two beautiful girls scantily dressed in bizarre garb were sitting opposite him, nodding like exotic blossoms. Creed hardly registered them as he came in.

Standing at the rear of the room, by a serving hatch, was Anna.

She had her back to him, waiting while a young woman sliced a piece of cake for her. Creed set his coffee down, untasted, on the first table

he passed.

The young couple sitting there looked at him and the boy made some remark but Creed didn't hear him. He was walking towards the small woman at the back of the room waiting for her cake. Walking towards Anna.

Creed was halfway there when the thought hit him.

Anna was dead.

His emotions were all howling that this was her standing before him, but Creed had seen Anna after she'd been shot. He'd been there when they zipped the bag shut on her. This woman could not be Anna. She had the same walk, the same gestures, but it couldn't be her.

He had been absolutely certain, but that didn't mean anything. The drug was affecting his mind. Warlock had led him here. Creed felt suddenly angry at the drug, as if it was a person that had let him down.

Justine's life was in danger and here he was, wasting time, lost in a hallucination about his dead girlfriend.

The woman was near enough for him to touch now. She had her back to him and all he had to do was reach out a hand and put it on her small shoulder.

He could turn her around and look in her face and see if she was Anna.

Instead Creed made himself turn away. He didn't need to see her face. He already knew the truth. Anna was dead. He was striding out of the back room, 239

heading for the brightly lit front of the café, when he saw the jacket.

The leather jacket was draped over the back of a chair in a dark corner booth. Creed recognised it. He ought to. He had paid enough money for it, in a boutique in Floral Street only a few hours earlier. It was the jacket he'd bought for Justine.

Creed slid into the booth opposite the chair with the jacket draped on it.

There was a fresh cup of coffee on the table and a newly opened pack

of cigarettes. Whoever was sitting here was coming back.

As he sat waiting, Creed saw a short, middle-aged woman walk past, carrying a piece of cake balanced on a plate. She had the healthy ruddy complexion of an outdoor enthusiast who'd just been for a bracing walk and she looked like someone's energetic and sexless maiden aunt. She walked with a certain military briskness. It was the woman he'd mistaken for Anna.

Creed smiled as he watched her pass, the resemblance evaporating the more he saw of her. The woman was sitting down at a table nearby but Creed lost track of her now.

Because the owner of the jacket was back.

A teenage Japanese girl sat down on the chair opposite Creed. She hardly glanced at him as she pushed her arms into the sleeves of the leather jacket.

She shrugged the heavy jacket on over her shoulders and began scooping up her cigarettes and coffee cup. Finally she looked at Creed.

'Excuse me, but I prefer to sit alone. I think I'll change tables.' She smiled at Creed, a glowing, insincere smile on her beautiful doll-like face.

'Don't go,' said Creed. 'I really like your jacket.'

The Japanese girl froze in the act of rising from the chair.

'Thank you,' she said. Then quickly, 'Excuse me. I must –'

'My friend has one just like it.'

The girl beamed at him, zipping the jacket shut. 'Oh, there are many in this style,' she said.

Creed reached over and tugged gently at a plastic tag dangling from the elbow of the jacket. It was a security tag embossed with the logo of the Floral Street shop. 'Not with the price still on it,' he said. Then he jerked hard on the tag, pulling the Japanese girl back down into the chair opposite him. He grinned at her.

'I found this jacket –' said the girl quickly.

'No you didn't. You got it off Justine and you know where she is. Now you're going to take me to her.'

The girl suddenly reached into the inside pocket of the jacket. But just as quickly Creed leaned across the table towards her, both his hands out of sight underneath it. He spoke quietly, confidentially.

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'That cold piece of metal you feel on your right leg is the barrel of a stripped-down ten-gauge shotgun. You try anything and all you'll have left below your knee is a bloody stump.'

The Japanese girl instantly stopped moving and Creed smiled across the table at her. Then, at the edge of his vision he saw a flicker of movement and a voice spoke in his ear.

'That's rather an ungallant thing to say.'

The voice came with a ticklish sensation of someone breathing on his neck.

The breath was warm and smelled of gin. Creed turned and looked into the face of the short woman. The ruddy-faced gym teacher. She was holding her plate, her piece of cake still untouched on it. She reeked of gin but also of an expensive perfume and another smell, so familiar now that Creed almost missed it.

The liquorice waft of warlock.

The woman smiled at Creed. 'My name is Mrs Woodcott,' she said. 'I thought you'd never get here.'

They were going to kill her baby. Justine lay staring up at the clean white ceiling. The stirrups were cold on her feet. They'd been forced to tear up lengths of bedsheet and tie her into the stirrups with them. The Japanese boy was resentful of the extra work but the medical student didn't want to drug her. 'Mr Keaton's orders.' he said. Then he turned and smiled at Justine. He was baby-faced, blond and raffishly handsome. 'And we all have to follow orders.' She stared helplessly up at him as he shrugged and took out a pair of thin film surgical gloves.

'This is a straightforward D&C. Let's not complicate matters.'

Justine

couldn't believe it. He was explaining it to her in a slow patient voice: 'D&C.

Dilate and curette, love. Scraping out the lining of your womb.'

He was talking to her as if she were a child. But Justine was probably a couple of years older than the medical student. He was just a kid. He'd arrived wearing a sweeping black trench coat and a white silk scarf, a can of beer in his hand. The Japanese boy had grinned and swigged it with him and when the can was empty he'd opened a refrigerator and taken out several bottles of Kirin.

They both reeked heavily of beer by the time they threw Justine onto the table and forced her feet into the stirrups. Now the Japanese boy sat back, face flushed and sweating, reduced to the role of spectator. He didn't seem to mind. He was quite content to watch as the English boy pulled on the surgical gloves and began to probe at her.

Justine would have screamed, but they'd stuffed some of the torn sheets into her mouth and taped them there with flesh-coloured medical tape.

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'Don't get me wrong,' said the medical student, a blond comma of hair dropping across his sweating forehead, 'I'm completely one hundred per cent in favour of a woman's right to choose. Normally. But in this case Paulie Keaton has decided that you've got to lose the embryo. You know, your sprog.'

He pulled his surgical mask aside so he could take a swig of beer. He wiped his mouth and then tugged the mask back in place. 'Just about ready to start,'

he said. He patted Justine's naked inner thigh with his latex-gloved fingers.

'Be over before you know it.'

He opened his instrument bag and took out a long glass rod with a small metal blade at the end. He came back and stood between Justine's legs. 'You might even say I'm doing you a favour. If you're stupid enough to make enemies with Mr Keaton then your genes don't deserve to survive. Any child of yours is likely to inherit your stupidity. And we're talking lethal stupidity here. Who'd make London's most powerful gangster angry? Well, you did.

And what kind of a life is there in this world for a child as stupid as you? I'll probably be saving the poor little bugger some grief, eh?'

The medical student glanced up from between her legs and smiled. ‘Think how lucky the little sod is. Never having to be born. Some people get all the breaks.’ He winked at her then bent forward to start working on her.

They were going to kill her baby and there was nothing Justine could do to stop them. She chewed at the choking rags in her mouth, straining until the veins in her forehead stood out, striving to scream.

The medical student paused in his work. ‘Look, love. Just relax.’ He took out a clean handkerchief from the pocket of his dinner jacket and gently wiped her forehead with it. The Japanese boy looked pissed off that the proceedings had been interrupted. ‘If you just relax this will all be over a lot sooner and it will be a lot easier on all of us.’

Neither the Japanese boy or the English boy noticed as the wall panel slid open behind them. The sliding panel made a certain amount of noise as it opened but Justine was deliberately covering that now as she struggled wildly in the stirrups.

The medical student lifted the glass rod again. ‘Come on now, love. Please.’

‘That’s right,’ said Creed, standing behind him with the gun. ‘Say please.

She’s a nice girl and I think you should be polite to her.’

The Japanese boy was so scared he just sat down and shut up, his arms held high in the air, so there could be no suspicion he was reaching for a weapon. But the medical student seemed more irritated than surprised. He turned around, still holding the glass rod. ‘Look, this is going to end up taking all night. Just who are you?’

Creed smiled at him, keeping the gun pointing loosely in mid-air, halfway between the Japanese boy and the medical student. Ready to go either way.

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‘Maybe I’m the father,’ he said.

The medical student glanced over at the Japanese boy then back at Creed.

He suddenly seemed to realize that he might have other problems

than an unexpectedly long night's work ahead of him. He put down the glass rod. 'Do you want me to put my hands up, too?'

'No. Take the gag out of her mouth.'

The student stripped off his gloves and carefully eased the tape away from Justine's face. As soon as it was loose she spat the bolus of torn rags out, spraying saliva into the English boy's face.

'Steady now,' he said. But his voice was drowned out by the cry from Justine. It was a primal howl compounded of vented fear and rage and joyous relief. It sounded like the first cry of a baby entering the world.

Creed was with her instantly. He hugged her with one arm, using his other hand to keep his gun on the boys. 'It's all right, you're all right now,' he said as she drove her face against his chest, soaking him with tears and snot.

'I'm sorry I ran away from you,' she sobbed.

'Forget it. You're safe now and the baby's safe.'

'How did you find me?'

'With a little help from his friends, dear.' Mrs Woodcott stepped through the open wall panel holding the Japanese girl in a hammerlock.

'You wouldn't believe this little bitch.' She entered the room, pushing the girl ahead of her. 'Keeps trying to escape. Just won't sit quietly.' She shoved the Japanese girl into a chair and gave a sigh of relief.

'There is a theory that all the ills of the world come from people who refuse to sit quietly,' said Mrs Woodcott.

Chapter 31

Canterbury Cathedral looked beautiful covered with snow. Shell felt her spirits soar as she looked up at it. The winter afternoon was just dimming to an early twilight. Shop windows were bright along the cobbled street, light flooding out into the cold air. Shell stole a glance at the man walking beside her.

He saw her looking and smiled. 'I can't believe I've pulled,' he said.

His name was Jack. Shell had met him fifteen minutes ago in Marks and Sparks. She had been working on the till and Jack had come through with his purchases totalling £6.66 on her computer readout. The number of the beast, right there in bright green figures. Like a sign. Shell had stared at it a second too long, then looked up into Jack's eyes. She could see what he was thinking.

He was thinking exactly the same thing she was. It was like they were synchronized. Soul mates. From the moment they met. It was destiny.

Shell had quit her job, then and there, walking out onto the street on Jack's arm. Now she looked up into the eyes of this man. This man she'd already begun to love. This man she'd hardly met.

'This is all a hallucination,' he said. He gestured at the bright shops and icy street and the gentle powder of snow sifting down from the darkening sky.

'I know what you mean.' Shell said. Her heart was pounding with happy excitement.

'No you don't. I mean you are literally hallucinating at the moment. None of this is actually happening. It's a mixture of memories and delusion.'

They stopped and stood under a lamppost, snow drifting down on Shell's hair and making it glitter. Shell stared up into the man's face and tried to read his expression. It was a strange blend of tenderness and rage. She reached up to touch that tormented face.

'What are you trying to say, that I'm dreaming? That I'm not really here with you?'

'Something like that.'

'Well, if I'm not here with you, where am I?'

Jack glanced away from her so she couldn't look into his eyes.

'You don't want to tell me?'

'I don't have to remind you about that. Not yet.' Jack's face was creased with pain and she reached out to caress it back to peace. He caught her hand 245

and gently lifted it away. He sighed. 'Come on. Let's go in that pub

over there.'

Shell had the oddest feeling that they should be going straight to her bedroom instead of into a pub, but she followed him into the building.

There was nothing special about it. It was located near the city wall, wedged between a pub and the municipal car park. She must have walked past it a hundred times, but she'd never gone inside. It was just one of those places.

She couldn't even have told you the pub's name until now. As they went in she glanced up at the sign swinging in the wind.

The Moonchild. How odd. She'd heard of the infamous Moonchild pub in London, of course, but she'd never realized that there was one by that name in Canterbury.

Warm beery air hit them as they hurried in from the chill grey winter's afternoon. Jack found a corner booth close beside a roaring open fire. She slid into the cosy darkness with him.

Shell had walked out of her job so quickly that she was still wearing her uniform pinafore. Now she used the semidarkness of the booth to strip it off.

She opened her bag and began pulling out her street clothes. Jack gazed in fascination at the tattoos which swept up her nude torso.

He was hungrily inspecting her bare breasts when a nun came over and sat in the booth beside them. Jack didn't seem surprised to see her. In fact he seemed to know who she was.

'Jack,' said Shell. 'Who is this?'

'Excuse me,' he said. 'I'll get us all some drinks.' He slipped out of the booth, leaving the half naked Shell alone with the nun.

'The name is Mrs Woodcott, dear,' said the nun.

'Why are you staring at my breasts?'

'I'm not. I'm staring at your tattoos.'

'They're beautiful, aren't they?'

'It's more the information content I'm concerned with.'

‘Information?’

‘Yes.’ Mrs Woodcott took a pen out of her robes and began sketching on the back of a beer-mat. She kept glancing up and down at the tattoo between Shell’s breasts. Shell felt like a model sitting for an artist.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Copying the map.’

‘What map?’

The nun frowned as she adjusted a few pen strokes on the beer mat. ‘Well, that’s how I see this information. As a map tattooed over your heart. It shows 246

the location of a small research lab near Canterbury. The same information could be expressed any number of ways, but a map was a good choice.’

‘But I don’t have a map on me. All my tattoos are of animals.’

‘Don’t sweat it. This is just a hallucination you’re having; said the nun. ‘A dream.’

‘Jack kept saying that,’ Shell frowned. ‘But if I’m dreaming then I’m not really here. So where am I?’

Mrs Woodcott looked sad. ‘We don’t have to talk about that just yet, dear.’

Shell suddenly shivered. She buttoned up her shirt and pulled a sweater on. ‘That’s what Jack said.’

‘Sit nearer the fire, you poor girl.’

‘Suddenly I’m scared,’ said Shell in a small voice. ‘I feel like something terrible is going to happen.’

‘Don’t be silly, dear, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault, mystifying you and frightening you.’ Mrs Woodcott patted her arm. ‘And it doesn’t help being dressed as a bloody nun. I always thought there was something faintly sinister about nuns’ apparel. Help me get this clobber off.’

Shell helped Mrs Woodcott pull off her veil and habit. Without these items of costume she began to look like an ordinary middle-aged

woman. ‘Ah, much better. I was melting in that lot,’ she said. She ran her fingers through her hair, scratching her scalp.

‘Sorry I frightened you. I suppose it’s because I’m used to being in situations like this. That is, I’m used to communicating with people in their drug trances.

I once appeared as a figure in the paranoid hallucination of a girl who was having an overdose. She was a kid who used to score drugs from me and as she neared death I appeared in her mind. She found me a sinister figure. God knows why.

‘Anyway, I apparently appeared in Justine’s hallucination the way I’m appearing in yours now. In fact, it somehow paved the way for me doing this.

As if by acquainting the universe with this notion, it made it more likely to happen.’

‘Are you saying that I’m having a drug overdose and I’m imagining this?’

‘Let’s just say that you’re in the perfect frame of mind for having this little chat with me.’

‘What sort of drug have I overdosed on?’

‘Do you know the word for a male witch, dear?’

‘You mean war –’

‘Don’t say it, thank you. I don’t want that name said aloud on this level of reality. It might cause. . . unpleasant phenomena to occur. But let’s not think of that. Let’s have a drink. What’s your favourite drink?’

‘My favourite drink?’

‘Yes. It will be the most richly imagined and the most vivid in your memory.

And that’s where we are, after all. In your imagination. In your memory.’

‘My favourite drink?’ Shell tried to concentrate on the question. ‘Iced vodka with blackberries, I suppose.’

‘Marvellous. I was up at the bar and they just happen to have some.’ Shell turned to see Jack standing there holding a silver tray. She noticed for the first time that there were Christmas tree lights strung up over the bar. On Jack’s tray were three frosty glasses containing a clear liquid with a purple cloud of berries floating in them. ‘Blackberry vodka,’ said Jack.

‘What luck,’ said Mrs Woodcott. She scooped a glass off the tray and took a sip.

Shell took Jack’s hand as he set a glass in front of her. She held it tight.

‘Jack. I’m so glad you came back. There’s something I have to tell you.’

‘Don’t worry about it. Drink your drink.’

‘Jack, do you remember my story about the calves?’

‘How could I? I don’t know you yet. We’ve just met.’

Shell ignored the remark. ‘My story about hitching that ride? When I was in France?’

‘You don’t have to talk about it now, love.’ Jack set his drink down and tenderly stroked her face.

‘Do you remember?’ insisted Shell. ‘I told you how my boyfriend and I hitched a ride in a lorry? And we freed all the little calves.’

‘Shell,’ said Jack. ‘Shell, love, you don’t have to tell me anything.’

Shell ignored him. ‘I was lying,’ she said. ‘The whole thing was a lie. Well, not the whole thing. We did hitch a ride. I did slip out of the café and try and unlock the truck. And the driver caught me. But the rest of it was lies.

Leonard, my boyfriend, rushed out of the café to save me.’

She paused for a moment. ‘Leonard was a sweet boy. He had these incredibly weak eyes. Surgery was no good. He had to wear glasses with lenses as thick as sandwiches.’ Shell smiled sadly and shook her head. ‘When he was looking at a painting in a book he’d hold it right up to his face.’ She shook her head. ‘He didn’t stand a chance. The driver took about a minute to finish him off. He left Leonard bleeding

on the forecourt. And then he. . . ’

She looked at Jack. He clutched her tattooed hand between his own. Shell liked his hands. They were like big hairy red paws. She swallowed and made herself go on with her confession.

‘He tried to rape me. But I managed to fight him.’ She looked at her long lacquered fingernails. ‘I raked his face. He was bleeding so much he could hardly see. I thought he was going to kill me. But instead he just went to the mirror on the side of his truck and he looked at his face for a long time. Then he looked at me very calmly. And then he said he knew what would fix me.

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He went back inside his truck and when he climbed back out he was carrying a tyre iron. I tried to stop him but he hit Leonard with it. He hit him here.’

She touched herself between the legs and saw Jack wince. ‘The metal bar made a wet sound when it hit him. I had to make him stop. He was going to kill Leonard. I had to do something. So I let him. I let him do it to me.’ She touched herself between the legs again. This time Mrs Woodcott winced. She picked up Jack’s glass of vodka and proceeded to drain it.

Shell sat back, hands folded in her lap. ‘He took me into the cab of his truck and it was over fairly quickly. Then he drove off with the calves. The people in the café called an ambulance for Leonard. While we were waiting I went into the bathroom and locked myself in. I took off all my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror. I looked at my body and I knew it didn’t belong to me any more. It belonged to the man driving that truck full of frightened animals.

He’d left his mark on me. He changed the way I saw myself.’ She looked at Jack. ‘That’s why I got my tattoos. That’s the real reason. So I wouldn’t have to see the same body I saw in that mirror that day. I took my body back. I made it mine again. By covering it with beautiful pictures.’

‘Don’t torment yourself, dear,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘There’s no need for that.

Besides, there is someone who wants to see you.’

Shell saw that a man was approaching the booth. The pub seemed to

have become suddenly darker because she had trouble seeing him properly.

‘Shell, this is the Doctor.’ Shell’s puzzled expression prompted Mrs Woodcott to explain. ‘The man who lives in the house on Allen Road. The one you’ve been so eager to meet, dear.’

Shell turned and stared at the man. He looked just the way she’d imagined him.

Mrs Woodcott lifted the beer-mat with the map sketched on it. ‘I’ve got what I came for, dear. But before I go, the Doctor wants a word with you.’

‘Can I really speak to him?’

‘Of course you can dear. He won’t bite. And I’ll have some more of this blackberry vodka. You have a very vivid imagination and it’s absolutely delicious.’

Shell looked shyly at the Doctor. ‘After all this time waiting to meet you, I can’t think what to say.’

‘You don’t have to say anything. I’m the one who must speak.’ He nodded at Mrs Woodcott, who was stowing the beer-mat in the sleeve of her nun’s garment. ‘We’ve now discovered your location.’

‘Why did you want to know my location?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Doctor. ‘Help is coming. But it will arrive too late for you.’ There was great pain in his eyes.

‘Help? What do you mean?’

But the Doctor had turned and walked away from the table. Jack moved closer and put his arm around her. He kissed her gently on the forehead. ‘You are beautiful,’ he said.

‘I love you,’ said Shell.

‘And I love you. And I’ll look after you.’ He pressed her face to his chest and she moaned. He stroked her hair. ‘Don’t worry, Shell. We’ll get out of this,’ he said. ‘We’ll get out of here –’ He broke off.

‘What?’ said Shell. Jack was looking at her strangely. She began to feel

frightened.

‘Tell her the truth, Jack,’ said Mrs Woodcott.

‘What does she mean?’

‘I can’t help you any more,’ said Jack. ‘I’m afraid the pain has to start again now.’

Shell shook her head in bewilderment. She was about to say that she didn’t understand when the pain hit her like a tidal wave.

The white cat screamed and Pam sighed with frustration.

‘Electric shock avoidance tests are used to show mental impairment,’ she said. ‘A monkey can be taught to stop the shocks by throwing a switch. This is useful to manufacturers of pharmaceuticals who are intrigued by questions about a monkey’s ability to throw a switch.’

The white cat twitched as the electricity hit it again.

‘The dose of drug that impairs this ability and leaves the monkey being repeatedly shocked is then scored,’ said Pam. ‘Of course, this version of the experiment departs from normal procedure in several ways. Cats aren’t often used in this test because they normally lack the dexterity to operate a switch.’

Pam watched as the cat squirmed with each subsequent electric shock. ‘But then, cats don’t usually show the dexterity to open their own cages.’

Pam decided she’d give this test another five minutes.

And then she’d increase the voltage.

Chapter 32

The red-haired waitress watched with approval as the young couple sat down at their table. She was so pleased to see them again that she’d gone to fetch a bottle of champagne on the house.

She’d been dying to know what happened to the couple. She’d been wondering about them ever since the girl had ditched the man, leaving that message.

‘How did you ever think I could forget my husband?’ That’s what she’d said.

But the waitress had known even then that the two of them weren’t going to split up so easily. She wasn’t surprised when they’d come walking back into Dewer’s. Walking close, not quite touching each other. They were obviously in love.

They hadn’t slept together yet, though, the waitress decided. She’d be able to see it in their manner if they had. They would be relating to each other differently. She could always tell about things like that. She had great intuition about people.

Especially on nights like tonight when she’d done a little warlock before coming on duty for the late shift. Working tables could get boring, even in a place like Dewer’s. She just had to make sure she chose a perfume that could disguise the tell-tale liquorice smell.

The waitress picked up a well-chilled bottle of champagne and made her way back towards the couple’s table. As she passed the kitchen she saw a tall young man in a long coat and a white silk scarf. He was heading for the group of tables where Paulie Keaton seemed to be throwing a party.

The waitress was glad it wasn’t in her section of the restaurant. She hated the idea of serving gangsters. Having to pretend that you liked them.

She was looking forward to presenting her couple with the free champagne.

The ice bucket was there ready at the table, but something was wrong. One of the chairs was empty.

This time it was the man who had gone.

The girl was still there. She looked up at the waitress, standing holding the cold green bottle, staring in surprise.

‘It’s all right,’ said the girl, ‘I haven’t been stood up.’ She nodded towards the other side of the restaurant where the gangster’s noisy party was progressing.

‘Creed just wanted to say hello to Mr Keaton,’ she said.

* * *

Paulie Keaton glanced up in surprise. ‘Nobody asked you to come back here,’

he said.

The young medical student looked unhappy. He was still wearing his black overcoat and he was nervously removing and replacing his long white scarf, as if he wasn’t sure whether he was staying or not.

‘That’s true, Mr Keaton. But I’m afraid I had no choice in the matter. Just as I had no choice earlier when you approached me at my table in front of my friends and told me you had a job for me.’

Paulie chuckled. ‘Still smarting about that, eh?’

‘In this case, sir, I’ve been asked to pass a message on to you.’

‘Well, go ahead then kid.’

‘Well, actually Mr Keaton, it’s not so much a message as a death threat.’

Keaton chuckled again. ‘Someone’s going to kill me, eh?’

‘That’s what he says.’

‘And how does he plan to do this? How does he plan to kill me?’

‘With body language, sir.’

People at nearby tables fell silent. Keaton frowned. ‘He plans to kill me with body language?’

‘That’s right, Mr Keaton.’

‘Well, that’s certainly a novel approach. When is he going to do this thing to me?’

‘Well, he’s already started, sir. He’s used his body language to slip past your guards. It was easy. He just walked towards your table as if he was an old and trusted friend. And he did it with such confidence and conviction that everybody accepted it. No one questioned his right to be where he was.’

‘Which is where?’

‘Sitting right beside you.’

‘Right beside –’

Paulie Keaton turned to see a man sitting at the table beside him.

‘Hello,’ said the man. ‘My name is Creed McIlveen.’

‘Well, Creed,’ said Paulie. ‘Aren’t you going to offer to shake hands?’

‘No.’ The man had the liquorice smell of warlock on him.

‘Very slick,’ said Paulie. ‘The way you got to my table without anybody seeing you.’

‘Without anybody seeing me in a certain context,’ said Creed.

‘So, what are you, invisible?’

‘No, like our friend says: body language.’ Creed nodded at the medical student and he went and sat at a table nearby, taking off his white scarf.

‘But now that I can see you, what’s to stop me calling for my guards and getting them to drag you away?’

‘No need for that. I’m going anyway.’ Creed eased himself out from behind the table, moving away from Paulie. ‘I’ve just got to do one thing before I go.’

‘What?’

‘Something I don’t want to do. But I have no choice. Justine and the baby aren’t going to be safe with you around.’

‘Okay, that’s enough threats,’ said Paulie Keaton. He moved to call for his guards but Creed had already stood up, moving away from the table. It was clear that he wasn’t about to attack, so Paulie relaxed a little.

But Creed wasn’t leaving. Everyone in the party seemed to be staring at him. It was because he was standing among their tables, tall and relaxed, his chin up at a challenging angle. Something in his posture said that he was confident and purposeful. Utterly unafraid.

Nobody stood that way around Paulie Keaton. Paulie was the dominant personality wherever he went. A few million years ago on an African sea coast a pack of pre-humans would have responded to their leader the way this group responded to Paulie. They'd scavenge on the beach and play in the waves, but always keeping an eye on their leader's silhouette as he stood on a rock or patrolled the littoral. His stance, the angle of neck and shoulders, reassured them that the familiar hierarchy was in operation and group dynamics remained unchanged.

Anyone who came near had to unconsciously acknowledge the leader's power. But sometimes there were challenges. A struggle for dominance when a new male confronted the leader. And dominance wasn't always determined by conflict. It was also influenced by the newcomer's ability to hold the group's attention.

Paulie had the kind of charisma you get when you have the power of life and death. He held himself like a man aware of his own importance. But now there was this young male, standing only a metre away from him, radiating leadership, and all eyes were on him.

Even Paulie's bodyguards were drawn to him. After all, they'd seen this man approach Paulie's table a little earlier and they'd been able to tell he was someone important. A friend of the boss. A man of power, to be respected.

Maybe even someone more important than the boss.

Paulie rose to the challenge automatically. He didn't know exactly what was wrong but on some atavistic level he knew his authority was being threatened.

Without thinking about it, he stood up so he could confront Creed on equal terms.

The whole restaurant seemed aware of the primitive conflict taking place in their midst. A beautiful red-haired waitress was the first to respond. She turned and stared quite openly at the conflict. She was the beginning of a ripple of attention and recognition. It spread among the diners the way a silence 253

sometimes spreads out across a crowded room until everyone's engulfed. And it holds way until finally someone laughs nervously and conversation tentatively begins again.

Like such a silence, this wave of attention spread across the room,

communicating itself from person to person, rippling off their behaviour from one to another like a yawn circulating. Now everyone in the restaurant had paused in what they were doing. They were all looking towards Paulie's table where the behavioural challenge was taking place.

Just as Paulie was standing up, Creed suddenly turned around. He wasn't consciously aware of Paulie. He just remembered that he'd left his glass on Paulie's table and he had a sudden urge to retrieve it.

So just as Paulie rose to confront him, Creed turned around and found himself face to face with the gangster.

It was perfect because it was such an unexpected move. Paulie's reaction and Creed's were nakedly obvious to everyone watching. Creed found himself suddenly face to face with the most feared man in London and his only reaction was mild surprise. He stared levelly into Paulie's face with curiosity.

But Paulie had a different reaction.

Paulie flinched.

It was an unconscious gesture, faster than thought. He jerked back from Creed as if expecting a blow. It was only a tiny movement, hardly perceptible.

Paulie quickly masked it. But it was all right, no one had noticed. He was sure no one had noticed.

Creed reached past him and picked up his glass and left. Paulie sat back down at his table. No one had noticed. He was sure.

The buzz of conversation was beginning again all over the restaurant.

Paulie scooped up a napkin and surreptitiously wiped his forehead. His heart was slowing in his chest. The acid anxiety in his stomach was calming. He was relaxing. No one had noticed. The sick feeling was passing. He was safe.

If only there wasn't this damned liquorice smell everywhere.

At a table near Paulie the young medical student put his coat on, pausing to swing his long white scarf around his neck. He came over to Paulie. You could see that he was angry but trying to conceal it.

‘Just in case I didn’t make it clear earlier, Mr Keaton, I didn’t appreciate the way you summoned me tonight.’

Paulie laughed at the kid and the kid’s anger. ‘Ruffled your feathers, huh?’

‘I was just eating here with some friends,’ said the medical student. He was getting angrier and angrier. But his rage genuinely amused Paulie. To him it was like the petulant futile rage of a small puppy or kitten.

‘Well, Dewer’s is a good restaurant, kid. I like it here. Even the King eats here.’ Paulie was enjoying taunting the boy.

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The medical student’s face was turning red and he was becoming inarticulate. ‘I didn’t ask to do a job for you.’

‘You could have said no. But you knew that would be a bad career move.

And when you’re a doctor, your career’s your life.’

‘I didn’t ask to end up performing an abortion on an unwilling woman.’

‘Hey, kid, please. I’m trying to eat.’

‘You’re. . . you’re nothing but a jumped-up little bully.’ The medical student was losing control of his rage. He suddenly hauled back and lashed out.

He punched Paulie in the face.

At first the sheer surprise hurt more than the blow itself. The shock that such a thing could happen. No one had touched Paulie without his permission for years. For a moment he was too stunned to react.

The medical student had already turned and stalked off, disgustedly inspecting a small splash of red on his white silk scarf.

Paulie put a hand to his face and discovered to his horror that his nose was bleeding. He was sitting here in front of all of these people with blood on his face. His bodyguards were staring at him like fools. He signalled for them to pursue the kid and grab him. The men didn’t move.

‘Get after him,’ said Paulie. But his voice broke from his throat in an unexpected and embarrassing screech, and several people giggled. Paulie glared around furiously and they fell silent.

‘Come on,’ hissed Paulie to his bodyguards. ‘Look at what he did to me!’

Paulie wiped the blood from his nose with his bare hand and one of the bodyguards threw a tissue to him. Paulie scrabbled after at it gratefully. He picked it up and clutched it only to discover that the crusty tissue had been repul-sively and thoroughly used already. It was horrible. How could they expect him to use this? He was bleeding! Paulie Keaton was bleeding. They should be taking this seriously.

But the bodyguard and his companion were laughing at Paulie’s consterna-tion. All around him, other tables began to pick up the laughter. It spread across the restaurant.

The red-haired waitress was approaching from the kitchens when she heard the cruel laughter. It was sweeping across the restaurant towards her like a wave. She hastily doubled back. It all seemed a little spooky in the restaurant.

But it was probably just her imagination. She was tired, she’d been working too hard, and there was the warlock she’d taken earlier.

On her way to the kitchen she saw the couple hurrying out. The man called Creed and the woman. His woman.

You could see she was his woman by the way she walked beside him. The waitress smiled as she watched them go past. He had his arm around her.

Tonight was going to be the night.

* * *

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The King was back earlier than expected. The guard on the gates saw the car approaching. It was an unfamiliar one, a Porsche. Coming from the direction of the ICA on the Mall.

But then the King often drove unfamiliar cars. He did insist on driving himself around and the security services in turn insisted on him

changing vehicles almost daily to confound terrorist attack.

The King drove through the gate in his rather nondescript new Porsche. As the guard later told his court martial, he hadn't actually seen the King's face when he let the vehicle in. He just remembered the confident and slightly impatient figure of the driver, who waved to him as he drove into the grounds of Buckingham Palace.

The guard hadn't bothered to look at the driver. He'd been certain it was the King. Instead the guard had been staring at the beautiful girl in the car with him. The King quite often came back with a different girl. And one didn't ask questions about that sort of thing.

So the guard just smiled and watched the car drive towards the palace.

Justine had to stifle a giggle as Creed carried her down the dimly lit palace corridor.

'What if they find us?'

'They won't.'

Creed kicked open a door at random and carried Justine through into one of the many palace bedrooms. She had her arms around his neck. Her body felt as if it was being softly absorbed when he hugged her. He was the man who had saved her life. Justine began to undress. He was the man who'd saved her baby.

Justine discarded her bra into the darkness and Creed picked her up and threw her onto the big four-poster bed. And Justine lay down with him there on the cold and faintly musty royal sheets.

Chapter 33

The phone rang when Maxine was running her bath. It was an antique wall-mounted phone and she had to come running naked along the corridor of the farmhouse to answer it.

It was Sean from the barn. 'I'm sitting here in this storage area with these three dummies. It's getting kind of lonely.'

'Hang on a minute,' said Maxine. She went down the corridor to the bathroom and returned, picking up the phone, a towel wrapped

around herself.

‘Sorry? What did you say? I had the taps running.’

‘I said it’s kind of creepy sitting here guarding these three.’

‘You’re not guarding them. You’re watching them for life signs.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like if one of them sits up and starts about property being theft or quoting Spinoza.’

‘Well none of them have done that.’

‘Good.’

‘I feel stupid for calling you.’

‘Listen, I don’t blame you. It’s very isolated out there in that barn.’

‘Yeah, and lonely. Why don’t you come and join me?’

‘No thanks. I’ve just finished my shifts down there. I’m not coming straight back.’ She listened to Sean’s disappointed silence on the other end. ‘But I do know what you mean,’ she said. ‘It is creepy. The way they just sit there, staring blankly. Not moving.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. I think I just saw one of them move.’

‘Come on, Sean. You’re imagining things. Let me go have my bath. You’re just –’

‘What’s wrong? Is something wrong?’

There was silence in the tiled corridor for a moment.

‘No. Just the taps dripping in my bathtub. It’s your fault. You’ve got me going now.’

‘I’m sorry, but I really thought I saw her move.’

‘Which one?’

‘The girl with the tattoos.’

‘Well, let me have my bath and a cup of tea and then I’ll come down and take a look at her.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sean, relief evident in his voice. ‘It’s just getting on my nerves.

She’s the only one who moved.’

‘Sean, you only think she moved.’

‘Okay, but even the other ones seem. . . ’

‘What?’

‘Restless.’

‘Look, I’ll be down there as soon as I can.’

‘Maxine, I’m sure there’s something going on.’

‘As soon as I can,’ said Maxine.

‘Wait. Don’t go.’

‘Sean, ring me if there’s any further developments. I’ll be with you as soon as I can. I’m hanging up now, right?’ She put the phone down and strode, heading back towards the bathroom.

As she walked along the corridor she heard an eerie high-pitched sound outside. Just the wind, she decided.

Maxine sighed as she approached the bathroom. No way she could have a nice relaxing soak now. A quick in-and-out of the tub and then she’d have to hurry down to the barn and calm Sean’s neurotic fears.

Behind her, back down the corridor, the phone began to ring again. But Maxine didn’t go back to answer it. She didn’t even turn around.

She was standing in the bathroom doorway and she couldn’t look away from what was going on inside.

The cat was just about finished. Pam had seen a lot of animals in her time and she knew that this one had just about reached the end of its experimental viability.

The fat white cat howled feebly out of its misshapen mouth. Not long now,’

said Pam, her teeth clenched. It had been a fairly rewarding session. Of course, she had been so busy working directly with the animal that she had been able to make only the sketchiest notes. She could have written her ideas down in more detail if only she'd had someone to assist her.

If only Tommy had been here.

Pam forced all thoughts about her brother out of her head. She made herself concentrate on the cat and the closing phases of the experiment. It wasn't easy, with all the noise.

The cat had been bad enough; but she'd expected noise from the cat and allowed for it. It was the noise from one of the dogs that really bothered her.

As soon as she had set to work on the white cat this dog had begun barking and howling, as if in sympathy with the discomfort experienced by the cat.

It didn't matter where in the lab she placed the dog's cage, he seemed to be aware of the plight of the white cat and he would respond in synchronization.

It was an intriguing phenomenon and Pam duly recorded it, with a note that the odd liquorice smell seemed stronger at those moments when the cat experienced pain and the dog barked.

The barking of the dog had a peculiar tone to it. Pam could almost have characterized it as helpless rage. The sort of painful emotion you might feel if someone you loved was in agony and there was nothing you could do about it.

But Pam knew she was merely projecting; reading her own feelings about Tommy into the situation. That didn't stop the dog's noise from getting on her nerves.

That's why Pam decided to suspend the cat experiments when this one was over.

She was going to attend to that dog next.

But then, as she prepared the killing injection for the white cat, the dog began making a noise like nothing she'd ever heard before.

The barn was cavernous and empty. Tin-roofed and windowless, a concrete room filled with metal shelf units. Even buried here, among the stacked boxes of pharmaceuticals, Sean could hear the noise the dog was making in the laboratory. It had begun to howl in a way that made his hair stand on end.

Sean had heard that sound once before, on his uncle's farm. His uncle had been dying in the main bedroom of the house with his aunt and assorted other relatives in attendance. His uncle's old dog had been in the yard outside and it had begun to howl as soon as the old boy went. And it kept the unearthly sound up for hours.

Howling for the dead.

Now Sean was hearing the same spectral sound coming from the laboratory.

A high-pitched keening of animal pain.

Sean's nerves had been on edge for hours, sitting in this room with the three living corpses. And then the body of the tattooed girl had twitched. He was certain he'd seen it twitch.

Now there was this endless wailing from the lab. It seemed to be vibrating through the metal roof of the place. It was so high-pitched it was almost beyond the audible, which lent it an itchy eeriness.

It was the final straw. He had to get out of this place. He looked at his charges, lying slumped in their dentist's chairs, the straps which had once held them now unfastened and draped loosely over their slowly breathing bodies.

Their breath was plodding and shallow, like some forced air heating mechanism sighing in an old building in the winter, dragging dirty air in and out and in mindless repetition. Their bodies had a putty-like lack of muscle tone, 259

as if whatever spark of life that had once inhabited them had fled somewhere else.

Sean had had it. He would go and check on Pam in the laboratory. This would have the twin effect of shutting the damned dog up and getting him out of this place.

He picked up the phone to call Maxine back and tell her what he was doing.

Sean heard two things simultaneously. The ringing of Maxine's phone at the other end and the sound, in the room behind him, of flesh sliding across one of the leather dentist's chairs.

'Don't think you're immune,' said Maxine. 'You could end up just like me.

Easily. If you needed a job and they offered you one. And once you start you discover it isn't so bad.'

But the woman called Justine ignored her. She went back into the bathroom to check on her husband.

'I think her mind's on other things, dear,' said Mrs Woodcott. She went to the bathroom and peered in, waving with her gun to indicate that Maxine should follow her.

Justine was kneeling over the tub, running more hot water over her husband, who floated there, his skin so pale it was bluish. His eyes rolled around sightlessly in his head.

'Poor old Vincent doesn't look his best,' said Mrs Woodcott, pursing her lips and ushering Maxine back out of the bathroom. 'Mind you, up until quite recently he was in suspended animation in a life-support tank, held captive by a bunch of thugs called IDEA at Thanet Airport.' Mrs Woodcott frowned.

'Thanet, of all places.' She turned and looked at the door as the woman called Benny entered. Ah, Bernice,' said Mrs Woodcott. 'I was just telling our new friend here about how you rescued that poor chap in the bathtub. You and Creed, that is.'

'And the Doctor,' said Benny.

'And the Doctor, of course.'

'What you don't understand,' said Maxine, addressing the woman who had just entered, 'is that you're not immune. None of you. You could have ended up working in an animal research facility yourselves. And if something like that happens you just have to cope with it. What do you think I am?'

'You tell me,' said Benny.

'I'm not a monster. I didn't like it at first. Of course I didn't like it. No one does. But gradually you get used to it. And then you start making

jokes, to help you cope with it. And then the jokes begin to seem pretty funny. Like the time the thermostat went on the fritz in the guinea pigs' hutch and we had a little accident. Then Sean started referring to it as "the grand pig roast" and 260

we all laughed and started using the phrase. It was pretty funny.' She looked up at them, searching their eyes for judgement. 'People in the emergency services make the same sort of jokes. Policemen, firemen, medics. They make sick jokes too, to help them cope. And the job we were doing here is just as important.'

'Bullshit,' said Justine, coming in from the bathroom where her husband was floating silently. 'The work you do here is worthless. You're testing drugs on animals that are intended for humans. None of the animal tests have any bearing on human reactions to the drugs. Angel dust was supposed to turn junkies into raging, crazed madmen with the strength of ten. But it was designed as an animal *tranquillizer*.'

'Sure,' said Maxine. 'And chloroform is a useful anaesthetic for humans but it kills dogs. Morphine calms people and rats but causes crazed stimulation in cats and mice. Aspirin causes birth defects in rats, mice, monkeys, guinea pigs, cats and dogs but it's harmless to humans.'

Justine unconsciously put a hand on her belly, as if shielding her unborn baby. 'You know all that and you still work here?'

'What else can they do to test drugs? All the money is on animal tests.

They're the traditional approach and scientists are nothing if not conservative.

It all comes down to money in the end and animal testing is one of the few things you can get funds for. I just had to decide whether I wanted a job or wanted to stay unemployed for the rest of my life.'

'Well, I hope you're proud of your decision,' said a small man who came in through the doorway moving quickly.

'I'm the Doctor,' he said to Maxine. 'And you're out of business.'

Dieter was kneeling beside the bath. He had a variety of boxes stacked along the edge of the tub. The boxes carried the logos of some of the large pharmaceutical companies who were among his customers.

The small man called the Doctor watched him carefully, checking the fine print on each of the drugs as he shook tablets out and gave them to the man floating in the tub.

The man, Vincent, was only half conscious and accepted the pills groggily.

This wasn't surprising since only a few hours earlier he'd apparently been trapped in a life-support tank. 'It will take him some while before he surfaces to full consciousness,' said Dieter.

'I know,' said the Doctor.

The anxious young woman came in and looked at Dieter. 'How is he?'

Dieter smiled at her as he snapped one of the pill bottles shut. 'What is your name?' he said.

'How is he?' repeated the woman.

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'He's going to be fine. Disoriented and incoherent for a while, then fine,'

said Dieter.

The woman looked to the Doctor for confirmation and he nodded. 'After all,' said the Doctor, 'he's been through all this before.'

'Now, what is your name?' said Dieter.

'Justine.'

Dieter smiled at her. 'And this is your husband, Justine.'

The woman hesitated. 'Yes,' she said.

'You don't seem sure.'

The Doctor stood up and moved to the bathroom door. 'Come with me, Dieter,' he said, terminating the conversation.

He led Dieter outside and began strolling in a leisurely manner towards the barns.

'That young woman seems to be in some confusion over her husband,'

observed Dieter. ‘And it seems that young fellow called Creed is part of this confusion.’

The Doctor didn’t reply. There were half a dozen cars parked on the curving driveway outside the main farm building and he was watching their owners wandering back and forth across the grounds of the laboratory. ‘I hope they don’t trample the flower-beds,’ said Dieter.

‘There was a small ginger cat,’ said the Doctor, suddenly turning to look at him. ‘His name was Chick. Apparently you picked him up and brought him here.’

‘I’m sure he’ll have come to no harm.’

‘Actually we already found him dead, amongst your laboratory waste in one of the big metal bins,’ said the Doctor.

‘Oh, I am sorry.’

The Doctor was looking at the grey square laboratory building. He turned to look at Dieter. When he spoke, he spoke so quietly that Dieter had to strain to catch his words.

‘I just want you to know that I will not permit you ever to set up another laboratory like this.’

‘I see,’ said Dieter.

‘I’ll put you out of business.’

‘That’s all right.’ Dieter shrugged. ‘It will be exciting for me to discover new markets.’ He watched a young couple walking towards the lab building.

‘What exactly are they doing? These people that you summoned.’

‘They are taking the animals away.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Taking the animals from your lab. Taking them away and finding new homes for them.’

‘Taking them away?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you’re destroying years of priceless research.’

‘Years of dubious research. Yes.’

The young couple came out of the laboratory carrying a cage. They walked towards the Doctor and Dieter. A cat yowled frantically at the Doctor from the cage they were carrying.

The Doctor chuckled and doffed his hat as it went past.

‘It’s almost as if the little devil knows me,’ he said. He watched the couple carrying the cat towards their car. ‘I’m so glad they’ve found better homes,’ he said, turning back to Dieter.

Dieter shook his head sadly. ‘You’ve taken away all my animals.’

‘Not all of them. There was one dog who managed to escape on his own, just as we arrived. He fled into the hills and we haven’t been able to find him.’

‘Which dog is that?’ said Dieter as they entered the laboratory. Then he said, Ah, yes.’

On the floor in front of them was a body with a white lab coat thrown over it, to cover the face of the corpse. A bright ragged red stain was coming through onto the white cloth around the neck area.

‘That dog,’ said Dieter.

‘He tore the throat out of this woman. Do you have any idea why he might have done that?’

‘What I find even more mystifying,’ said Dieter, ‘is that she let him out of his cage at all.’

‘Maybe he managed to let himself out.’

‘How could he?’ Dieter smiled. ‘He’s just a dog.’

The Doctor didn’t return his smile. ‘According to the lab computer the woman working here had just killed a cat.’

‘We prefer the term “clinical sacrifice”.’

‘In any case, it seems to have died just as the dog got out. In fact, it

seems to have triggered his killing of this woman.'

'Her name was Pamela Hunnicutt. Poor Pammy.'

'I'm more worried about that dog,' said the Doctor. 'I hope we can find him.'

Dieter followed the Doctor out of the laboratory and past the ornamental pond.

Creed stood in the doorway of the barn, waiting for them.

'I've managed to keep the animal enthusiasts away,' he said. 'I pretty much convinced them that there's nothing in here that they'd want to take home.'

Just inside the door two bodies lay, looking sad and discarded. One of them was a burly muscular man with long blond hair. 'That's the guard,' said Creed.

The Doctor nodded sadly.

'His name was Sean. Clever boy. Very good with people. This is such a shame.'

'You can write a poem about it later,' said Creed. He indicated the tattooed girl lying on the floor. 'Her name was Shell, apparently.'

The Doctor kneeled to have a closer look. Shell still had her hands wrapped around the man's neck. Her eyes were flat and dead and now the Doctor closed them. The bright tattoos on the girl's face stood out against her pasty pale skin.

'She was part of the experiment,' said Creed.

'I deny that there was any experiment,' said Dieter.

'Denial is bad for the soul,' said Mrs Woodcott, coming in through the glass doors. 'Take Creed here for instance. He's denying what's going on between himself and Justine.'

'Justine's a married woman,' said Creed quietly.

'Yes, but who's she married to? I understand there was a kind of honeymoon which took place at one of London's more famous

landmarks. While I was hard at work looking for this place.'

'That reminds me,' said Creed. 'I've got something for you.' He took a small flat object out of his pocket and handed it to Mrs Woodcott. It was a beer-mat with a crude map sketched on the back. Mrs Woodcott took it. 'It's the best I could do. I drew it during a dream.'

'Well, it got us here.'

'Not soon enough, though.' Mrs Woodcott stared down at the tattooed girl on the floor. 'Poor thing. She was in love, you know.'

Mrs Woodcott looked up at them. 'Come through and I'll show you the bloke she was in love with.'

Beyond a set of glass doors they came to a room full of shelving units. 'It all started one day in Canterbury in the snow,' said Mrs Woodcott. Stacked on the shelves were boxes bearing the logos of the world's great pharmaceutical concerns. She led them through aisle after aisle of the boxes, turned left and came into an open space with a metal ceiling high above them.

On the concrete floor were three old-fashioned leather dentist's chairs. The first chair was empty. In the second a big, bearded, red-haired man appeared to be sleeping. 'That's him,' said Mrs Woodcott. 'His name is Jack. He was her boyfriend.'

On closer inspection Jack clearly was not sleeping. His breathing was thin and shallow and there was an odd slackness to his face.

'He doesn't look too well,' said Creed.

'Neither would you if your body was lying in that chair while your mind was running around in some dog miles away.'

'What a ridiculous suggestion,' said Dieter.

'What's your story then?' said Mrs Woodcott.

'We discovered your three friends unconscious on our grounds. We took them in and gave them shelter.'

'Oh, come on.'

'We made them comfortable but they were evidently in some sort of

coma.'

'Until one of them got up and strangled your guard.'

'A tragedy, but only one of several that we share.' Dieter looked at them.

'The drug must have had an unforeseen effect on the tattooed girl. But it also seems to have left these two deeply catatonic. Jack and your friend. What was her name?' Dieter turned to the third chair.

'Ace,' said the Doctor.

'Your poor friend Ace,' said Dieter. 'She may never wake up again.' He went over to look at Ace in the third chair. He peered down into the girl's slack, expressionless face.

Ace's eyes flashed open. 'You're so full of shit, Dieter.'

Mrs Woodcott gurgled with laughter. 'You look like you're about to have a heart attack, Dieter old thing.'

Dieter was backing away in shock as Ace got down from the barber's chair, swinging her legs around and lowering herself gently to the floor. 'Careful,'

said the Doctor, 'you'll be unsteady on your feet for a while.' He helped her.

'But this is marvellous.' Dieter had recovered his characteristic poise. 'She has regained her faculties.' He swung around suddenly, turning away from Ace and back to the dentist chair with the red-bearded man in it. 'But what about Jack? What has happened to poor Jack?'

'Don't try and change the subject,' said Creed.

'We couldn't find the dog,' said Ace. 'That's what's happened to Jack.'

'You're still a bit confused, aren't you?' said Dieter solicitously. 'How did your friends manage to wake you up?'

'We gave her a further dose of warlock,' said Mrs Woodcott, coming in from one of the aisles of boxes. She was carrying a small black cat. 'And we did the same to this rather beguiling creature here.' She stroked the cat and the cat purred. 'And then I took one myself, for good measure.'

Dieter turned to Ace. ‘And how long have you been awake for, my dear girl?’

‘For a couple of hours.’

‘So you’ve had time to talk to your friends. Clearly you are the source of these ridiculous stories. It must have been this drug, what do you call it?

Warlock. It has caused you to hallucinate.’

‘There was a hallucination going on, all right,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘But it was the hallucination of a girl called Shell. A girl with tattoos who was dreaming of a winter’s day in Canterbury.’

‘You seem to know a great deal about it,’ said Dieter.

‘I was there,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘She showed me where this place was and I drew a map of it.’

‘Oh, really? You drew a map while you were in a trance?’

‘More like a hypnagogic semi-waking state,’ said Mrs Woodcott.

‘In which you met the dead girl.’

‘She wasn’t dead then. If she had been it might have proved a bit more problematic. But no, she was alive. It all took place in the mind of a dying cat.’

Dieter turned to the Doctor, shrugging and smiling. ‘Hardly a statement of scientific fact from a reliable trained observer.’

‘Are you trying to say I’m some kind of lunatic?’ said Mrs Woodcott.

‘Certainly not. But you admit yourself that you took this drug, warlock. It has caused some strange beliefs in your mind.’

‘Well, here’s another one to add to your strange belief collection,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘I have a strong and very vivid fixed notion that warlock is very angry at you for what has happened and is going to see that something quite unpleasant is waiting for you.’

Dieter frowned. ‘You refer to this drug warlock as if it was a sentient living thing.’

‘You bet your sweet ass,’ said Mrs Woodcott.

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Chapter 34

It was the first really cold morning of the year. There was the promise of winter in the air and you could see your warm morning breath fog on a pane of glass.

Ace leaned back from the window. The garden below looked cool and crisp, with white streaks of frost on the unruly grass. Too late to get the lawnmower out this year, she thought. Maybe next spring.

Ace put on a long T-shirt and a pair of espadrilles, then eased the door open. The old house on Allen Road had half a dozen bedrooms, usually plenty.

But last night they’d had a full house, with the Doctor breaking out army surplus thermal sleeping bags because there weren’t enough clean sheets to go around.

Ace made her way down the stairs quietly so as not to wake any of the guests. The house creaked, feeling warm and full of people. Ace felt safe inside it as she tiptoed down to the kitchen.

But there in one corner of the tiled floor she saw Chick’s bowl and it was if something in her mind lurched.

Dark memories began rising. She felt a hand at her elbow and turned around to find she was face to face with the man called Creed.

He smiled down at her. ‘Sit down and let me make you some coffee.’

‘No, I’m fine.’

‘Well, just sit down and talk to me then.’

Ace couldn’t find any immediate grounds for objection so she settled on a stool at the counter. Creed took a pot of coffee off the stove and poured himself a cup. Ace thought of Pammy and the long night at the lab and she shuddered.

Creed noticed. He blew on his coffee and set it aside. ‘Too hot.’ He grinned at Ace again. She liked the sardonic jagged lines of his face when he smiled.

‘I understand you had an unpleasant experience using warlock.’

‘What do you know about it?’ said Ace.

‘I’ve had a couple of close encounters myself. I first tried the drug in New York. Purely in the line of duty, you understand. So did your friend Benny.’

‘Bernice. Yeah, the Doctor arranged for her to join whatsit. The International doobery thingy.’

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‘IDEA. Yeah I was a member myself until my contract was invalidated in London.’

‘You mean you left your job?’

‘I had to.’

‘I trust you got a decent settlement.’

‘Sure. Company car and bags of money.’ Creed smiled and sipped his coffee.

‘And some interesting firearms, too,’ said Benny, coming into the kitchen with the Doctor.

‘Hey, it’s Miss Winterhill.’

‘Summerfield.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Creed –’

Creed turned to see Ace frowning at him. Her eyes were clouded with memory. ‘In a funny way, it wasn’t unpleasant,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘Warlock. In a way it wasn’t unpleasant. Not the drug itself. The drug itself wasn’t evil. It was what we made of it. We brought our conflict with us. It wasn’t really to blame for what happened.’

Benny went over and put her hand on Ace’s shoulder. ‘I know what you mean. Ugly things happened but it was the people making it

happen. Not warlock.'

'Sure,' said Creed. 'Warlock was as helpless as we were.'

The Doctor was staring at them, having just come back into the kitchen. Ace realized he'd slipped out into the herb garden and he'd taken something with him. She felt a surge of gratitude when she saw that Chick's bowl was gone from its traditional corner of the kitchen. The Doctor had discreetly disposed of it outside. 'The three of you sound like an advertisement for warlock,' he said.

'Well, the three of us have tried it. You haven't.'

'What a shame there aren't any more of those white tablets left,' said the Doctor.

'Oh, I don't know, I'm sure I could find you some.' Mrs Woodcott entered the kitchen. 'I still have pretty good connections for a woman who spent a year hiding in a nunnery.'

'And I still have some samples in my car,' said Creed. 'Or maybe Justine's got them.'

At his mention of Justine there was suddenly an awkward silence in the kitchen. Ace didn't understand why, though she could sense that there was something going on between Creed and the married woman. The two were being exceptionally polite to each other but avoided ever being in the same room together.

'Go on, Doctor, try a tablet,' said Mrs Woodcott. 'Or a mushroom. I'm sure warlock is eager to make your acquaintance.'

'So am I,' said the Doctor. 'In fact, I think that process has already begun, without any need for white tablets or mushrooms.' He looked at them. 'I've already begun to make the acquaintance of warlock. Through social interaction with you.'

'Good morning.'

Everyone looked up as Justine and her husband came into the kitchen. Vincent was walking slowly, half supported by his wife. His skin was still somewhat pale and his eyes bloodshot but he was looking stronger.

He and Creed smiled and nodded politely at each other.

‘How are you going?’ asked Creed.

‘Not bad. Emerging from a life-support tank’s a bit like coming out from under a general anaesthetic; I’ll be shaky for a few days.’

‘Speaking of life-support tanks, I’d better see how our friend’s getting along in the garage.’ Creed got up and left the kitchen.

Benny followed him, going out through the back door into the herb garden.

She found Creed crouching there beside one of the planting beds, a low hum-mock of rich black earth edged with old bricks. He was fingering the masses of green plants, flourishing unstricken by the frost.

‘Sage,’ said Creed. ‘Basil, thyme. I know my homegrown herbs.’ His breath fogged in the cold morning air as he stood up, brushing dirt off his knees, and went into the garage.

Benny followed him into the petrol-smelling darkness. Creed was standing in the pale green glow of a tall glass cylinder. Benny went over to join him.

She said, ‘Where did the Doctor get the life-support tube?’

‘It’s the one that Vincent was in. At Thanet airport.’

‘Was it difficult freeing Vincent? Getting him away from IDEA?’

‘Not really. There was no one there. Webster was the only one left. Artie and the Cowboy Monster had apparently already flown back to the States.’

‘Good old Artie. Anyone get hurt?’

‘No. Webster seemed almost pleased to see me. He asked me to point a gun at him, though, so he wouldn’t look too bad in his report. I agreed, for old times’ sake.’

‘I guess he still felt guilty about that business in Canterbury.’

‘Yeah,’ said Creed. ‘But that’s no one’s fault. Anyhow, we got Vincent out in one piece and set about waking him up. But we brought the tank back here.

Just as well we did.' He peered into the green fluid.

'How long does he have to stay in there?'

Benny stared through the glass at the man called Jack. He floated in the cylinder, his eyes shut. His long hair and his beard floated around his fat face 269

like gently swaying red seaweed.

'Forever, unless we can find his mind.'

'And the Doctor believes it's stuck inside a dog somewhere?'

'It sounds crazy, I know. But that's what Ace says, too.'

'Well, crazy things have been happening ever since I discovered warlock.

Ever since the Mayans gave us our first taste. Do you remember that?'

'I'll never forget it. You handled things very well.'

'Yeah.' Benny looked up from Jack's sleeping face, floating in the pale green fluid. She looked into Creed's eyes. 'I was pretty impressed with you, too.'

They left the garage and wandered out into the chill morning garden, the long grass wet around their ankles. 'Fancy a walk?' said Benny.

'Sure.' They set off towards the half-ruined Victorian greenhouse.

'You saved her life,' said Benny.

'Justine? I don't think so.'

'Well, you saved her baby's life. And you saved her husband.'

'I guess so,' said Creed.

'Poor Vincent. He's her husband. He's supposed to look after her. But he was powerless when she was in her greatest danger.' Benny looked at him.

'He just wasn't there. How do you suppose he feels about that?'

'Not too good,' said Creed. 'But he's going to have to learn to forget

about it.'

'And Justine hasn't had it easy, either. She was in a very vulnerable position.'

'About as vulnerable as a woman can get.'

'Exactly. And she's naturally very grateful to the man who saved her. It's a natural response. You might say it was automatic.' Benny looked at Creed.

'Are you trying to tell me something?'

'She couldn't help it,' said Benny quietly. They were past the greenhouse now, down by the section of old stone wall that screened the house from Allen Road. Benny stopped walking. She turned and looked at Creed. 'Let her off the hook,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'Justine doesn't want to leave her husband for you.'

'Then why isn't she telling me this herself?'

'Does she really have to? You're just making things difficult for them. You could save her marriage. You shouldn't let her make a mistake like this.'

'Mistake?'

'Splitting up with her husband and running off with you.'

'Miss Summerfield, I think you're smart and I've got a lot of time for you.

So I know you won't be offended when I say –'

'Creed,' said Benny softly, 'you don't know what I'm offering you here.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't you?'

Creed shrugged. 'Look, Benny, for years I felt like I was dead. But the

last few days I felt like I was coming back to life again. Just the last few days. Just since I met Justine. For years my life was zipped up in a body bag. Now she's set me free.'

'She's going to have a baby,' said Benny in a small voice.

'Yeah, and I'll raise the kid like it's my own. That's the way it's going to be.'

Benny looked up at him. 'But what if it's not going to be that way, Creed?

What if she doesn't want to leave her husband for you?'

'What makes you say that?'

'I was talking to her this morning. We had a long talk. Maybe you should brace yourself for a shock,' said Benny. She looked back at the big house.

'Maybe you should just shut up.'

'Creed –'

'Benny, this is none of your business.'

'Look –'

'This is my life. Just stay out of it. It's Justine's decision, and mine.'

'Creed. Look behind you.'

'What?'

'On the wall.' Benny's face was pale.

Creed turned and looked at the old stone wall that ran uphill towards the tree-line. Hanging down over the green mossy stones was a rope-ladder.

Benny looked around the grounds towards the big house. 'Someone's broken in.'

'Poor Jack.'

The light of the life-support tank shone on Ace's face. The pale green glow gave her an unearthly beauty.

‘And that poor girl,’ said the Doctor. ‘What was her name?’ He turned to Mrs Woodcott who stood beside them in the darkness of the garage. Ace liked the garage. It smelled of burlap sacks and sweet grass trimmings and bicycle oil.

‘Shell,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘Poor little thing with those pretty tattoos. It takes a lot of guts to wander around like that. To be different.’ She nodded at the man floating in the life-support tank. ‘She loved him.’

‘Yes,’ said Ace. ‘At least we’ve managed to keep him alive.’

‘His body, you mean.’

‘Yes. Isn’t there any way we can get him back into it?’

‘Not unless we can find the dog.’ The Doctor turned and looked at Mrs Woodcott. ‘Although perhaps warlock could help him in another way.’

Mrs Woodcott shrugged. ‘I don’t claim to be an expert,’ she said.

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‘The national police computer seems to think you are.’ The Doctor brushed some dried leaves off an old horn-loaded loudspeaker and held the garage door open for Mrs Woodcott. They emerged blinking in the morning light.

They crossed the patio by the herb garden and stepped through the back door of the house into the brightly lit warmth of the kitchen.

Vincent was sitting at the counter surrounded by plates of toast, jam jars and the wreckage of a plate of bacon, eggs, sausages, pancakes and maple syrup. He looked up at them with some degree of embarrassment.

‘What a magnificent breakfast,’ said the Doctor.

‘Yeah. Justine seems intent on serving me everything in the refrigerator.’

Justine smiled from the cooker where she was pouring coffee. ‘I want you to get your strength back. Can I do you some more pancakes?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

Vincent turned and snapped at her, ‘For Christ’s sake!’ There was a pause.

He laughed, trying to pass it off as a joke, but an awkward silence lingered in the kitchen.

‘Well, Doctor.’ Mrs Woodcott cleared her throat. ‘In answer to your earlier question, I may well be an expert on warlock, in comparison to most people.

But I wouldn’t claim to be able to understand its motivations and objectives.’

Vincent smiled tensely at the Doctor. ‘She keeps talking about warlock as if it’s a living thing.’

‘Well, I sort of agree with her,’ said Justine. She sat down at the counter and put a fresh cup of coffee in front of her husband. ‘Creed says –’

‘Creed.’ He spoke the name quietly, but it was almost as if he was spitting it out. ‘All right. Let’s hear what Creed thinks.’ He turned and stared at his wife.

‘I’ll tell you what I think,’ said the Doctor. ‘Drugs are often referred to as

“agents”. But I think warlock is an agent in a different sense. I think it has some claim to being a living thing.’

‘You’re kidding,’ said Vincent.

‘Well, I agree with the Doctor,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘But then, I would. My world view is informed with certain cultural definitions. The notion of a drug as a sentient entity is right up my street. Look at mescalito or –’

Vincent cut in. ‘Is that what you’re saying, Doctor? That warlock is sentient?

A living thing?’

‘Well, a collection of information can be said to be a living thing.’ The Doctor wandered over to a shelf on the kitchen wall. He reached up and pulled down a volume from among the jumbled piles of cookbooks. The book was called *Mind Wars: MK/Ultra and the CIA’s*

Use of Psychedelic Drugs by Abel Lexington.

The Doctor blew dust off the book and began to leaf through it. ‘Genetic information is certainly alive and it’s ultimately just a collection of chemicals.

And this drug also consists of chemicals.’

‘Oh, come on. A random bunch of chemicals isn’t alive.’

‘Warlock is anything but random,’ said the Doctor.

‘But genetic information goes through cycles as living organisms.’ Vincent glanced at his pregnant wife. ‘As human beings.’

‘Warlock goes through a cycle in human beings, too,’ said the Doctor. ‘In their minds, in fact.’

‘That’s exactly what Creed says.’ Justine sipped her orange juice. Her husband flashed her a look of hate but she didn’t look up.

‘But is it intelligent?’ he said.

‘Well, it would seem to be, if it is trying to communicate with humans.’

‘Communicate? Like knocking on the table at a seance?’

‘Possibly. After all, it is a drug which enhances communication.’

‘Where does it come from, warlock?’

‘It occurs naturally in a wild mushroom which grows in one small region of Russia. It’s known locally as the toadback because of its distinctive colouring.’

‘Well, you’re ignoring a flaw in your argument,’ said Vincent. ‘Assume this drug is a living thing. Assume it wants to make contact with human beings.

I doubt that it would still be trying. After millennia on earth it would have achieved communication with us long ago.’

‘What if it only arrived on earth recently?’ said the Doctor.

There was silence in the kitchen.

Vincent stared at the Doctor in disbelief ‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying?’

But at that moment everyone turned to look. The back door had opened.

‘I’m sorry about this,’ said Ace. She came into the kitchen, moving slowly, followed by the man holding a gun to her head.

A cold wind sent dried leaves skittering along Allen Road. Creed helped Benny heave the iron gate open and followed him as he ran out onto the pavement.

‘It’s just up here,’ he yelled. Allen Road curved to the right just outside the gate and he was already out of sight. Benny ran after him.

As she came around the curve she saw the rope-ladder hanging down from the stone wall. But Creed was ignoring it. He was standing beside a small sports car parked close to the wall.

He stood up as Benny trotted over. ‘What’s wrong?’ she said. There was a look of pain on his face.

‘What is it?’

‘Don’t look in the car,’ said Creed.

Benny looked in the car.

Jammed between the seats was a body. A small man was lying face down and you could see the worn soles of his shoes. There was a hole in one and you could see his threadbare red sock underneath. He was wearing an IDEA baseball cap. The man looked oddly familiar to Benny. But it couldn’t be.

‘Artie,’ said Creed.

‘Oh no.’ It was.

‘Shot through the head.’ Creed had already turned away and begun running back up Allen Road, towards the gate. Towards the house. Benny ran after him. He pelted through the gate and up the gravel driveway. Benny was running as fast as she could but hardly gained

on him until they were nearly at the garage.

‘But who did it?’ she gasped, falling in alongside Creed. ‘Who killed Artie?’

Creed didn’t reply. He was opening the trunk of his Porsche and taking something out from under a blanket. A handgun.

Benny followed him as he came out of the big garage and into the herb garden. Creed went through the door into the kitchen with the gun held ready.

‘Welcome back, son.’

‘Hello, Mr Harrigan. Put the gun down.’

The big Texan smiled and shook his head. ‘No can do, son.’ He had a big Colt revolver pointed at Ace and Justine. ‘In fact, I’m going to ask you to do just that for me.’ He wagged the gun at Justine and Ace, who were sitting on stools, crowded into the corner of the kitchen where the spice cupboard met the pantry. The gun was an antique but it looked none the less lethal for that.

It was pearl-handled and silver-plated. The big skull ring on the old man’s finger had an answering silver gleam.

Creed lowered his own weapon.

Harrigan smiled, clearly a little relieved, and waved the big gun at Vincent who was lying on the red tile floor. The Doctor was crouching beside the young man, inspecting a blue bruise that was forming on Vincent’s skull.

‘Had to give that boy a lump on the head. He tried to stop me.’ The big man looked down at the Doctor and grinned. ‘It’s okay. He’s only unconscious. I didn’t hit him too hard.’

‘You could have killed him.’

‘Hell, no. He’s just going to have a serious headache on top of that life-support tank hangover.’ The big Texan nudged Vincent with the toe of his cowboy boot. ‘That boy just has no luck at all does he?’ He glanced up at Creed. ‘I understand you’re taking his wife away from him, too.’ He looked over at Justine sitting in the corner.

‘Did you come here to talk about my love life?’ said Creed.

‘Happy to,’ said Harrigan. ‘Pour a whisky and talk away, son. But first I want to give the young lady this.’

He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out something. He flung it at Justine and it unfolded in mid air. A scrap of delicately fashioned black cloth. A piece of lingerie.

Justine caught it.

‘Your bra,’ said the old man, grinning. ‘Scotland Yard found it in a bedroom at Buckingham Palace.’

‘What exactly is this?’ said Ace. ‘Are you a cop? Are we under arrest?’

‘Oh, I doubt it,’ said the Doctor. He got up from the unconscious Vincent and went to the counter. ‘It’s been a long time since Mr Harrigan was an honest lawman.’

‘Well, I find that comment a little stinging, especially coming from an educated man like yourself, Doctor,’ said the Texan.

‘When was it?’ The Doctor frowned. He picked up his book from the counter and began leafing through the pages. ‘Over a lifetime ago, wasn’t it?’

‘You don’t miss much, do you?’ murmured the old Texan, looking at the book in the Doctor’s hands. The Doctor opened the book to a photograph.

The black-and-white picture showed a young man in a cowboy hat squinting out of the window of a 1950s American automobile. The face was bland and innocent. Above the pale brow was a cowboy hat. The Doctor pointed at a corner of the photograph where the young man’s hand touched the brim of his hat.

‘He’s wearing the same ring as you.’

‘Well, if you just read the caption, Doctor.’

‘I have. It says Henry Harrigan. That’s your name.’

‘Correction. I’m Henry Harrigan Junior. That’s my daddy in that picture. He loved that ring. He used to say it reminded him he’d have to die one day. So it made him use his time usefully, the way we all should.’ He peered down at the savagely grinning skull. ‘I guess these

days it does the same thing for me.'

The Doctor frowned thoughtfully. 'That's very interesting and colourful and quite touching. All the more interesting since Harrigan actually died without ever having any children.'

'Damn.' The old Texan smiled and shook his head in admiration. 'Doctor, you must have got into some obscure databases I haven't managed to alter.

You're a clever fellow, that's for sure.'

'So if the man in that photo isn't your father, who is he?'

'If you're asking that question I reckon you must know the answer.' The old Texan's face wrinkled as he gave a sly wink. 'That's me in them pictures.'

'But this man has been dead for decades.'

'His body is dead. But Henry Harrigan lives on. That's me.' The old man gave a mock bow but his gun remained steady, pointing at Justine.

'Transfer of consciousness,' said the Doctor. He looked at Ace. 'That's a symptom we're beginning to recognize.'

'You mean he used warlock?' said Creed.

'That's right, son. I was probably the first American to encounter this interesting chemical.' The Texan reached into the watch pocket of his waistcoat and took out two fat white capsules. The smell of liquorice was immediately present in the room. 'Which reminds me.' He put the capsules down on the counter.

'What is that?'

'Warlock, mostly. Cut with some speed or something to make sure it's absorbed and metabolized super quick.' The old man smiled. 'Fast acting, you might say.' He swallowed one of the capsules and pushed the other one across the counter, nudging the fat white capsule with the barrel of his gun. 'Now.

Creed, son, you take this one.'

‘No thanks,’ said Creed.

The old Texan didn’t bother asking again. He simply whipped his gun around and fired.

Across the kitchen the kettle bounced off the stove and fell jangling into the sink, smashed into an ugly metal deformity by the impact of the bullet.

‘We only just replaced that,’ said Ace bitterly.

The old man ignored her. ‘I can shoot a few more kitchen appliances, Creed, or I can move straight on to the womenfolk.’ He pointed the Colt revolver at Justine. ‘And I think I’ll start with the pregnant one.’

Creed stepped forward, picked up the capsule and swallowed it.

‘That’s real good. Now just relax, son,’ said Harrigan, ‘and let it happen.’

‘It’s happened before, hasn’t it?’ said the Doctor. He tapped the book. ‘It’s all in here.’

‘Well, I guess it is, if you read between the lines.’ The old man picked the book up and squinted at the spine. ‘I really need my glasses for this.’ He smiled. ‘But not for long.’

‘Are you familiar with that book?’

‘I ought to be. I lived through the times it talks about. After the war the CIA started fooling around with all kinds of weird drugs. LSD, MDMA, and warlock. I was in charge of the warlock experiments.’

‘And you began to see the possibilities of the drug?’

‘A Russian girl called Ludmilla had already told me some interesting stories about it.’ The Texan rubbed his wrinkled face. ‘Stories that became more interesting to me as I got old.’

‘For the first time,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s right. When I grew old for the first time. I was stuck in a desk job for the CIA, my ass was getting fat, I was bored.’ The big man sighed. ‘And I was getting old. Beginning to miss all the things that I used to be able to do when my body was young and strong. So I

decided to make my body strong and young again.'

'Was it easy?'

'Sure. It was like trading in a used car. I just revived some of the CIA drug programs. Got a bunch of young recruits and chose the best candidate.'

'You must have taken warlock yourself.'

'Oh yes. I'd been experimenting with it on and off for years.'

'And you transferred your consciousness into a new body.'

'Yeah. A new, young body. Army recruit who was an orphan. No close friends. No one to miss him. I moved inside his skull and booted him out.'

The man tapped his forehead. 'Took up residence. A squatter, you might say.

And I arranged a heart attack for my old body.'

'It was still alive?'

'But, you know, like blank. Nobody at home. A vegetable. Hardly a person at all. Still gave me a mighty strange feeling, though.' Harrigan frowned at the memory. 'When I slipped a syringe into that arm. My own arm, if you like.

Killing my own body. Killing my old self.'

'And you faked a new identity?'

'Fake? It was for real. I'd been working on it for years. The mysterious son comes back from overseas for his old man's funeral. Meets the old man's friends. Starts looking for a job.'

'You had to begin your life again.'

'My career, anyhow. It was easier than you might think. I had a head start, you might say. A load of important government contacts. People my "daddy"

knew really well. So of course I knew their strengths and weaknesses. In a few years I was just about back where I wanted to be.'

‘Fighting the war against drugs,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s right. I’d discovered for myself what could be achieved through drugs. Plus the money was good.’

‘I imagine it was.’

‘Don’t be so frowny-mouthed and disapproving, Doctor. It ain’t the money.’

The old man grinned and saliva gleamed in a long strand between his big teeth. ‘It’s the things money can buy.

‘And of course I wanted to keep tabs on what was happening. Particularly on warlock.’ He looked up at Creed. ‘You feel anything yet, son?’

‘Maybe.’ The liquorice smell was rising in the room. Benny shuddered. She remembered the ‘seance’ conducted by the Mayan brothers.

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Ace felt her stomach heave. She was remembering a laboratory and a flapping bird and a cat.

For Justine, all the smell brought back was memories of Creed. Sitting beside him in the Porsche. Running out on him in the restaurant. Lying naked in his arms in a musty bedroom in Buckingham Palace as the first thin morning light came through the window to shine on the threadbare carpet and a dangerously miswired electric plug.

‘Even then warlock had begun to mutate. It seemed to be changing into something new. Or going in a certain direction. And I wanted to keep an eye on it.’

‘You believe that warlock is a living thing?’

‘The way that a stream or maybe a tree is, sure. It changes. It grows. And like a stream I can swim along it. And like a tree I can climb it. To get where I’m going.’ The old Texan nodded at Creed. ‘I can feel it taking effect, son. We can get started soon.’

‘You weren’t kidding when you said you wanted to hand everything over to me.’

‘That’s right, Creed boy. I want you to take over as the boss of IDEA. I’ve left instructions to that effect, for when I have my fatal heart

attack.' The old man took out a syringe and set it on the counter. He pushed it towards Creed.

'You can do the honours, son. Or rather, I'll do the honours with your hands.

As soon as I take up residence we'll burn the old edifice down.' He touched himself on the chest with one big wrinkled, age-discoloured hand.

'And then the new me will take over IDEA. That organization needs a firm leader. I don't want to see it slip.' His eyes were clouded with proud nostalgia. 'It was all my creation, you know. The International Drug Enforcement Agency. Drug busting for the government was fun, it was educational, and by God it was well funded. But I realized that the gravy train couldn't go on forever. No matter how stupid people are, they're eventually going to realize that drugs are basically a public health problem and they'll decriminalize them.'

'So you had to implement your idea,' said the Doctor.

'Sure,' said the old Texan, 'My idea. IDEA. A high-profile agency to give the media great footage and keep the public gung-ho about the war on drugs. Yep, folks,' Harrigan beamed at them. 'IDEA supposedly originated as a pooling of resources by Interpol and the FBI. But it's basically a propaganda exercise, designed to keep drugs illegal.'

'That's cynical and deplorable.'

'Sure. The Drugs War is like the Cold War. Basically they're both massive fictions. Manipulation of prejudice. But don't knock 'em, Doctor.' The old Texan's eyes twinkled. 'They earned a few clever guys a lot of money over the years.'

'Including yourself.'

'Oh, my interest wasn't solely commercial. I knew that warlock was something special.'

'Yes, any drug that cures mortality might justifiably be defined as special.'

'The fountain of youth,' said the old Texan. The liquorice smell was rising off him like a powerful musk. Set deep in their nests of wrinkled

skin his eyes were wide, intoxicated.

‘What a ludicrously oversimplified view of a very interesting drug,’ said Mrs Woodcott.

‘Well, I’m too much of a gentleman to contradict a lady,’ said Harrigan, tipping the brim of his cowboy hat towards Mrs Woodcott.

‘Don’t give us that loathsome longhorn charm,’ she said. ‘You have a dangerously narrow view of warlock.’

‘Warlock is a means to an end for me.’

‘And where will I be when you take over my body?’ said Creed.

‘Why, you’ll still be there, son. In some sense. Like a lurking thought. A thought I won’t quite remember but I’ll never quite forget. And now and then one of your memories will burst through. And I’ll remember it for you. Some deep powerful memory. Like the first girl you ever kissed. Maybe one day she’ll come to me in one of your memories and I’ll be able to enjoy that kiss on your behalf.’ Harrigan seemed excited now. ‘It’s starting, son. I can feel old warlock taking off in my head.’

‘You’re making a bad mistake,’ said Mrs Woodcott. ‘“Old warlock” is not a servant you can bend to your will.’

‘Well, I’ve done this trick before and it worked pretty good.’

‘You don’t understand, you fool. Warlock is a living thing.’

‘She’s right, Harrigan,’ said the Doctor. ‘Warlock is a living organism. And intelligent.’

‘If you say so, Doctor.’

‘And it doesn’t originate on this planet.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘And it wants to go home.’

‘Go home?’ Harrigan snorted.

‘That’s why it’s been trying to reach me,’ said the Doctor.

Harrigan chuckled. ‘The only one that’s going home is me. Moving to a new home.’ The liquorice smell filled the kitchen now, pungent and

intense. The big Texan nodded at Creed. ‘Get ready to clear out, boy. I’m moving in. I’m taking over.’ The old man’s voice was dropping to an incantatory cadence, low and hypnotic. ‘Like a two-ton steer pawing the ground. I’m about to charge and chase you out! Right,’ he hissed. ‘It’s about to start.’

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‘Fine. Proceed any time you’re ready,’ said the Doctor. And as he said it, Vincent reared up off the tiled floor and grabbed for the old Texan.

Harrigan fired his gun but Vincent had already driven it up with one hand, so the Colt discharged harmlessly overhead, blasting a shower of plaster off the ceiling.

Vincent reached out his other hand for the big man’s throat. The Texan’s eyes were eerily dark and wide and liquid. His pupils were hugely dilated.

The warlock was obviously strong in him. His breath stank of liquorice as Vincent grabbed and squeezed, making contact.

It was Harrigan’s throat that he grabbed.

But it was warlock’s mind that he made contact with. Memories.

Memories of the journey. The long journey. Hurtling through space with the many selves contained in the neat patterned structures of the vehicle.

The bright energy web of that vehicle twisting like a living flame. Weaving through different dimensions of possibility, existing in many different places at once and nowhere at all. It flies between the galaxies. It dances on the edge of existence, carrying ourselves vast distances for a reunion with a far-flung branch of the Family.

Carrying our anticipation of the reunion like a bouquet of the rarest blossoms.

Carrying our excitement across unimaginable distances.

Shooting

through space faster than thought, keening with the joy of reunion.

Then the unheard-of happens.

System failure. The energy flux of the ship ripples out of control. We scream back into the hard reality of the physical universe, torn and smashed and cut by the transition.

Dropping from space, drawn by the strong gravity of a nearby planet. A looming blue-green planet. A cool, ocean-rich giant that fills the sky as we are sucked into its atmosphere.

Slicing through continents of cloud as we fall, out of control, from a great height.

The vehicle now scorching with friction as it returns to mineral form from raw energy, its molecules slowing and reconfiguring. The vehicle screaming out of control as it wrenches out of the long journey along the ghostly paths.

Dropping back into the lower realms.

Falling to the earth.

Through cooling clouds, water vapour scalding to steam at the touch of our cherry-red hull, superheated now it has solidified into mineral form.

We fall, steaming and twisting. We scream through the sky, a scorching hot new comet in the heavens of this world.

Falling towards the vast green seas of its surface. Towards the strangest maps of its land masses. Falling across half the globe. Falling into night. The 280

dark ground rushing closer. Falling faster and spiralling, using a last powerful thought of the living vehicle to steer itself toward a promising landing site.

Native vegetation. Trees. Thick masses of green to be ploughed into as you plunge from the sky, having dropped from the greatest height thought can comprehend.

A falling stone, burning and screaming and flashing miles of forest into flame at your touch. Tearing into the earth with a sound like thunder, blasting the night open for miles around, forest fire blasting up from the torn earth as horses start kicking down stable doors in villages twenty miles away.

And the whole great slab of this segment of rural Russia shakes with

the seismic impact of the ‘meteor’ that falls this night.

And then the pain. The slow crawling out of the tangled wreckage of the ship, a slender trickle of surviving life and intelligence. A tiny thread of sentient information worming up towards the light. Trying to weave itself into the reality of this planet. Sprouting from the raw torn forest floor. Growing in that fertile mulch. Merging with the spores of a fungus. Growing to maturity as a mushroom, a new mushroom. A mutant, its genetic code altered by the questing alien intelligence.

An intelligence that hasn’t quite forgotten what it is. Growing blindly up, searching for a way out. Searching for a way off the planet. In its tours through human minds it seeks and selects and hunts, like a plant’s green shoot rising up through the earth, reaching out. Moving towards the light. Towards the ultimate goal. Towards escape.

Moving towards the Doctor.

The mushroom mutates over swift fungal generations, altering its own natural tendencies to produce toxins. It tailors those toxins as humans begin to sample the mushroom and interact with those toxins. The mushroom becomes a drug and people experience its effect and introduce other people to it.

The drug navigates through them, seeking the ones who would serve its purpose.

Warlock finds the girl called Shell because it is seeking out the Doctor, and it uses her because she is a useful vehicle to him. Just as, decades before, it found a useful stepping stone in a man called Harrigan.

As it flows towards its own destiny, warlock sweeps the man’s intelligence along, carrying it from one human body to another.

Warlock moving with its own agenda, moving towards its own goal. Towards this moment.

Towards escape.

Now the alien intelligence of warlock flowed into Vincent’s mind like quick-silver and he understood all these things and more.

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Vincent sensed the old Texan’s mind caught up in the energy web of

warlock, part of the complex pattern of information.

Harrigan was still thinking that warlock would carry him along with it, carry him into a new body.

Like an old turtle that's about to shed its shell. And climb into a brand new one. That was the way it had happened once before. When he'd been reborn before.

But now warlock just flipped Harrigan off into the outer darkness, shedding the complex mesh of his mind like a dark bird shaking a drop of water off its wings as it took flight.

And as his mind vanished forever into the void, a pattern of information dispersing like smoke, the old Texan's body began to go, too.

Warlock caused it to energize, igniting his withering cancerous body for what little fuel value it had, converting it into heat in one luminous instant which lit up the tiled kitchen of the house in Allen Road and gave it a cheerful warmth that would last for hours.

'Oh well, at least it hasn't left a body for us to clean up,' said Ace.

And that bolt of liberated energy hit Vincent, driving the payload of warlock's intelligence. A sentient creature finally free.

Flashing upwards from the earth after decades trapped in the darkness. A creature so intangible that it trembled on the verge of what exists and what doesn't.

But it existed now. As a pure powerful flame of thought. Driven by the incinerated husk of the old Texan it roared forward, a bolt of thought colliding with Vincent. Primal thought and even more powerful emotion.

A single emotion.

The desire to go home.

And Vincent did what he did best. He magnified the effect.

So warlock surged upwards, riding an energy wave. Streaking up, away from the earth, streaming out into the universe. Far beyond the atmosphere of the blue-green giant, into space, lancing out into the distant galaxies. Travelling again. Alive and united again.

Going home again.

As they watched, warlock exploded out, escaping into the sky and beyond, and Harrigan's body turned to ashes.

Ace thought of the phoenix rising up from the tattoo on Shell's forehead.

And Benny thought of a dark bird carved on a cemetery gate. A bird carved in antique wood, taking wing as it rose into darkness.

But all Creed thought of was Justine. She had come to him. She had run across the kitchen. To him. She had chosen. She'd made her decision.

282

Creed held her tight. She was trembling in his arms. Taking shelter there as the old Texan turned to ash and crumbled in the grip of her husband.

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Chapter 35

'The future,' said Vincent.

He manoeuvred the Mercedes into the inner lane and began to slow down.

The Doctor had given him the keys to the car this morning and his face had appeared, small and anxious in the rear-view mirror when he'd waved goodbye.

He'd been concerned about Vincent's safety.

'I'm fine. I'll be all right driving,' he told the Doctor and the Doctor told him to keep the Mercedes.

Vincent's own car was presumably still in a municipal multistorey in Canterbury, still clocking up overtime on its parking ticket. Vincent had no intention of ever going back for it.

Let Justine have the car. She could go and get it if she wanted it. It was half hers. They'd bought it with their pooled savings a few years after they'd been married.

Vincent had driven away from the house in Allen Road with the Doctor waving to him, a shrinking figure in his real-view mirror. Ace and Benny had already said their farewells to the kitchen that morning. Careful washing of the tiles had removed the greasy smudge which was all that remained of Henry Harrigan Jr. That and a melted blob of silver, still faintly recognizable as a crudely-fashioned skull.

'Almost in Canterbury now.' said Vincent. When the sign appeared at the roadside he slowed a little and made the turning. There were apple orchards on either side of the car, trees flickering past in neat geometric rows, and then they were in town.

Vincent saw that there were still emergency vehicles parked in side-streets as he skirted the city centre and in the distance he could see a congregation of big earth-moving vehicles where the cathedral had once stood.

Other than a few detours with temporary traffic lights, the road system in Canterbury had almost returned to normal and Vincent was through the city and on his way north in less than ten minutes.

'I don't know where we're going,' he said. 'Except not to London. Not home.

What used to be home.'

Justine hadn't said goodbye to him. He wouldn't let her. What was the point? He didn't know her any more. She wasn't his wife any more. He'd watched from an upstairs window as she left the house with Creed.

'She just got into the Porsche,' he said, glancing over to see if his passenger was listening. 'She just got in and drove away with the American.' He paused for a moment, tapping on the steering wheel as he drove. 'But you know all about that, don't you? You know all about that kind of pain. I could see it in your eyes.

'Because of course I'm going through the same thing. But you probably never would have guessed. It hasn't quite sunk in yet. I'm still acting pretty normal. No one would know I was potentially seriously unbalanced. Though when I bought twenty bars of chocolate at the service station I think that guy might have suspected something.' Vincent smiled.

‘That was just before I picked you up,’ he said, glancing at his passenger and then looking back at the road.

‘It’s odd that we bumped into each other at all. I don’t really know why I pulled in by the side of the road there. I certainly wasn’t looking for company.

Maybe I just wanted to put my thoughts in order. Or try to have a good cry.

Or maybe eat ten of those bars of chocolate.’

The car hummed along the motorway. The sky ahead was darkening now. It was hard to tell whether it was an approaching storm or just the early autumn evening drawing in.

‘But I did meet you. And you got in the car with me.’

Vincent smiled. He tapped the steering wheel again, looking at the bloody rag wrapped around the knuckles of his right hand.

‘Except it wasn’t quite that easy, was it?’ He turned and looked at his passenger. ‘I don’t blame you. I mean, I know you didn’t really mean any harm.

Like I say, I could see it in your eyes. You’d been driven mad with pain. You didn’t mean to hurt me.

‘You didn’t mean to bite me.’

The dog stirred on the seat beside him and yawned, a long red tongue lolling out of its mouth. Vincent smiled. ‘Tell you what,’ he said. ‘Why don’t I call you Jack?’

The dog suddenly twitched, its yawn abruptly terminated. It shifted on the seat, watching Vincent.

‘I don’t know why I chose Jack,’ he said. ‘It just popped into my head.’ He looked at the dog again. It lay there looking back at him.

‘It seems to suit you. Or at least it suits me. I like the sound of it.’

He smiled. ‘Like I said, I know you’re crazy. Driven mad by some tragedy.

But you’ll get over it. You’ll be okay.

‘Just remember. The future. No looking back, that’s our motto. We’re heading towards a new life.’ He dabbed on the accelerator with his foot.

‘As for the past, don’t even think about it. It’s over. Gone. Even something that happened one second ago is in the past. It’s history. Don’t look back.’

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The bank of grey clouds ahead had broken open to allow a mountainous slant of late sunlight through. The fields and trees on either side of the car lit up in the smoky yellow light. Vincent squinted as the windshield dimmed to compensate.

‘Jack the dog and Vincent drive off into the sunset,’ he said. ‘The future.

Adventure. The open road and whatever it might bring.’

The dog said nothing, of course.

Vincent put his foot down on the accelerator. The car was moving along at steady speed now and he wanted to reach for a bar of chocolate. It was on the seat beside the dog. He’d have to reach past the dog to get at it.

But he was a bit concerned about how the dog would react.

He didn’t know if it was going to lick him or bite him.

Like the future.

287

It was the ruthless pack instinct of the primeval forest. But warlock magnified it a thousand times and made it lethal.

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